Almega Rising

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/5488064.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Robert Lecter, Bedelia Lecter, Robert Zeller Lecter, Alana Bloom Lecter, Jack Crawford, Beverly Katz, Donald Sutcliffe, Kade Sutcliffe, Original Graham-Lecter Child(ren), Dr. Frederick Chilton, Abel Gideon, Lloyd Bowman, Saul Katz, Matthew Brown, O/C Paul Jorgensen, Mason Verger, Margot Verger, Ardelia Mapp, Antony Dimmond, Barbara Komeda, Paul Krendler, Freddie Lounds
Additional Tags:	Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Non-Canon Relationship, Omega Trafficking, Bigotry & Prejudice, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Homophobic Language, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Possessive Behavior, Canon-Typical Violence, Sexual Content, Sexual Harassment, Relationship Issues, Alternative Universe - FBI, Mentioned Implied Suicide of O/C, Rebel Frederick, Stalking, Erotomania, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Domestic Fluff, Hannibal is Not a Cannibal, Implied/Referenced Incest
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Dual
Stats:	Published: 2016-01-07 Updated: 2019-03-16 Words: 80,030 Chapters: 21/?

Almega Rising

by libran53

Summary

Omega Will Graham knew that marriages of convenience didn't always last. For nearly seven years his was just fine until it wasn't. Will decides to rekindle his old romance with the FBI while Hannibal gains an unwanted admirer.

Notes

Set approximately six years after Almega. Hannibal and Will have four children - Andrius, twin girls Gabriella and Willow and baby Tomas. They still live with Hannibal's parents and his sister Alana. />
The first two chapters include a series of flashbacks.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As lame duck President Donald Sutcliffe waddles out of office and with the Lecters set to lose the protection of the White House, shocking secrets ripping this family apart are about to emerge. Rumours suggesting all is not well in the Graham-Lecter marriage and that a split is imminent have recently surfaced. The roguishly handsome Hannibal Lecter has been cutting a dashing figure on the society scene for several weeks. Always surrounded by female admirers, he has been accepting the many awards thrown his way for his architectural accomplishments. Conspicuous by his absence, Will Graham-Lecter rarely appears in public, with a close friend saying the stay at home Omega is sick and tired of his Alpha's roving eye. As Alana Lecter continues to keep a low profile since ditching her cheating fiancé, brother Zeller has spread his wings and flown the family nest. Considered the blandest of the siblings, he has chosen to pursue his career in another state, leaving behind this relationship-doomed family.

FREDDIE LOUNDS

TATTLESOCIETY

Robert had faced many protagonists over the years but this young pretender was, by far, the toughest. The brown eyes staring into his were unflinching and the lawyer who specialised in international land registration and was the President's top advisor steeled himself for the final battle. The seconds ticked away and the much older Alpha wasn't sure he could hold on for much longer.

Bedelia called out from the doorway of the sitting room. "You are being silly, Robert."

"Don't interrupt." Robert hissed. "I'll lose my concentration."

It was a gesture of last resort, aware of opponent's weaknesses, Robert twitched his nose quickly before the magazine tapped his head. Averting his gaze, Bedelia stood to his side with the offending article in her hand.

"I've won, I've won." Andrius cried out. "You blinked, grandfather."

Robert blustered at his wife. "Why did you interfere, I nearly beat him this time."

"Playing these silly games with Andrius. You are too old for this type of behaviour. You will damage your eyesight."

As his five year old grandson bounced up to him, grinning from ear-to-ear, Robert huffed under his breath. "Two against one."

Robert loved his grandson, loved all his grandchildren. Outwardly, Robert Lecter gave the impression of an Alpha completely in control whose feathers could never be ruffled. People assumed he had come from a bookish household with both parents being dedicated academics. Although to a certain extent it had been true, his mother had taught elementary school and his father was a lawyer who later became a magistrate then mayor of a small Lithuanian town, Robert and his siblings had grown up a farm and all had been expected to work for their supper.

Robert's own children had far outreached his expectations, excelled in their chosen professions but he had never pushed them and had let them set their own pace. Robert maintained a moral consistency which had been instilled since he was young. He had come from a country where Omegas where not just equal but in some aspects superior to the other dynamics. A country where an Alpha considered themselves honoured if an Omega accepted their proposal of marriage. It was with this frame of mind Robert had viewed Will Graham and had expressed his fears when the eighteen-year old Omega had married into the family. Orphaned at a young age, Will seemed lost and lacking in confidence and Robert worried that by marrying his dominant son, Will would be subjugated. Six and a half years later and having given birth to four wonderful children, the Omega was an important part of the Lecter family. Moreover, Will had shown he was more than a match for Hannibal Lecter.

"You lied to me, Will." The words surfaced when he heard the children squeal a welcome for their father on his return home after a hard day's work .

"You better go, Will." Zeller's face was set and Will knew any dissent would create awkwardness between him and his brother-in-law.

"I'll be back in a moment. This doesn't take long."

Will got up from the chair and casually walked out of Robert's home office to where the children were standing, chattering excitedly to Hannibal as he fussed over them. Keeping his impulses under control, Will cruised towards the huddle and fashioned a smile. His Omegan brain was urging him to gratify the Alpha by showing him submission and docility. His experience yelled that he would lose respect by displaying the needy, pathetically vulnerable element which Hannibal despised in Omegas.

"Good day?" Will asked and graciously received the kiss Hannibal placed on the cheek Will had presented to the Alpha. Will couldn't help a pang of jealousy as he saw the expressions of adoration on his children's faces as they looked up at their father.

"Yes and I have managed to get ahead of schedule. Hopefully, it will leave Saturday free and I will have time to spend with my favourite people." Hannibal said looking directly at the children. "However, I shall be late home tomorrow as I will be dining with Antony."

"I'm just finishing working with Zeller. Fifteen minutes then I'll get them ready for their dinner." Will didn't wait for an answer, the work he had undertaken was another no go area but he could feel the blast of cold anger as he returned to the office. He could still hear the giggles as he closed the door and returned to the desk, glancing fondly at his sleeping baby, Tomas Valdas Lecter.

"I'll take another look but I'm gonna have to sign off, now that his Highness is home."

Zeller ignored the remark, understanding it was Will's way of dealing with an impossible situation and not taking offence at the snarky comment aimed at his brother. Once more Will studied the files laid out before him but his actions were half-hearted, inside he knew his chances for extracting more information were slim to none, now that his frame of mind had been interrupted.

"Let it go, Will." Zeller said eventually. He had seen this before, everything swamped Will within the first few moments, any attempt to return to the same mind set after an unexpected brake was often met with failure. "If there's nothing new then Jack Crawford is going to have to use other resources."

"This Omega killer..... this remote viewing is hit and miss. If we were at the crime scene I'd recover the mindset instantly." Will said admitting defeat. Preparing to leave to attend to his children he added. "Tell Jack I'm sticking to my guns. These killings were staged. The journalist, he's the real target."

A former E R doctor working at the Omegan General Hospital, Zeller Lecter hadn't changed course on a whim. He had researched extensively the downside to forensic pathology before deciding to leave general medicine and commit himself to years of further study. The visit he had made to Quantico all those years ago with Will had made a lasting impression and had enabled him to understand the Omega's fascination with the Bureau. Whether a fascination or a border line addiction Zeller was never quite sure. He was sure the dullness in his own private life was a factor which drew him to the FBI.

Zeller packed up the papers and photos scattered across his father's desk. Try as he may, try as the BAU may, only Will could conjure up a picture from a few jumbled puzzle pieces. A gift, Special Agent Jorgensen had described it, one that most Omegas with duality possessed, the ability to put themselves into the shoes of others. Their gift but ultimately their curse, Jorgensen had added, relating stories of Omegas in law enforcement who had descended into madness.

At their first meeting Zeller had not liked Jorgensen, it was only now when they worked for the same department did he begin to appreciate the Beta. He had the same dedication and

determination as Crawford when it came to catching killers and placing them behind bars. Where Jack would bellow and bawl out an agent who fell down on the job, Jorgensen's air of disdain and detachment hid his heavy-duty sarcasm which was both effective and cruel. His vicious sideswipes at anyone who through incompetency muddied his waters were legendary within the Bureau and it ensured everyone who worked with him never cut corners.

Will had ushered the children into the downstairs shower room and supervised as they washed their hands. After inspecting their efforts, he followed them into the dining room where Andrius, independent as ever, climbed onto a chair. The Omega aided his two little girls whilst Tomas still sleeping, was left in his carrier. With the plates set before the children and water in their beakers, Hannibal took his place at the table. He and Will constructed mundane conversations, feigning politeness, in order to keep up appearances.

"It has taken me six months to write one line of poetry." Antony Dimmond sighed as he glanced around the busy bistro.

"Why?" Hannibal inquired as he placed his knife and fork onto his plate.

"At short notice, I was asked to chair the Cambridge committee researching the decline of the nocturnal Lepidoptera. My venerable predecessor who had engaged in several liaisons with ladies of the night, found himself splashed across the front page of the local tabloids and had to resign. Of course, it was sod's law that while my hands were full with one task, my agent would call from New York and insist I write another Adonis Blue adventure."

"Only you could name your hero after a butterfly."

"Yes, but it took a while before the penny dropped even with my agent. There I am, every evening, squatting over a keyboard trying to deposit a fresh tome whilst carrying out my day job. It isn't surprising my poetry became a casualty of circumstance, I can juggle two loves of my life but not three." Antony picked up the wine glass and studied the contents, seemingly lost. Hannibal recognized the signs his friend frequently displayed before sailing into uncharted waters. "I was romancing the other day about how lucky I am to have such good friends. Take us for instance. Two strangers strolling along a boulevard in Paris who bump into each other and voila. Your arm soon firmly placed around my waist, the first link in a lasting friendship."

"You were drunk and fell at my feet. I was concerned about leaving a young Englishman who spoke atrocious French in such a dubious area. I embraced you to keep you upright and to enable us to walk to a safer location."

"Oh what it was to be young and foolish."

"You speak as if we are in our dotage. Thirty four is not ancient. If you have something to say, Antony, then do so. I will not take offence."

Antony enjoyed Hannibal's directness. Where he meandered, Hannibal launched an all out attack. "I like Will, I was surprised when you married an Omega but Will is good for you. I am saying this as your friend, not as a muckraker, but there are rumours circulating, dissecting your marriage. If you do not act they will metastasize putting you into the position of confirmation or denial."

"I do not care what polite society has to say about the matter." Despite his bourgeois appearance and his foppish manner, Hannibal knew Antony was nobody's fool. Highly intelligent, he exhibited good sense when emotions ran high.

"No, but you care about your children." Tipping the glass, Antony finished the remainder of his wine. "Believe me, Hannibal, the worst part of my parent's decision to divorce wasn't the fact they could no longer bear to live with one another, it was the fact I was informed of the news from one of my roommates at boarding school. It was humiliating. After calling the boy a liar, I discovered he knew more about the hellish state of affairs within my family than I did."

"The children's well-being is my priority. I am confident the situation will be resolved."

"Well, don't leave it too long. My parents assured me they still loved me even though they were no longer in love with each other and that after the divorce, everyone would be in a happier place. Take if from me, Han, it was total bollocks. No matter what their intentions were at the time, eventually they were at war and both expected me to take their side." Antony reached for the Merlot and refilled his glass. "Will is very beautiful and is the flame to moth. If the past is to go by, he will have young bucks wooing him, should you decide to go your separate ways."

Hannibal waited until the young server removed the plates from the table. "Has Will been subjected to advances."

Antony realised his faux pas, mentally cursing the wine for loosening his tongue. "I've heard remarks made about Will's desirability but have only witnessed one actual attempt upon his person. It was during Alana's birthday bash at DuMaurier house, when her toe rag fiance Wetherly corralled young Will in the kitchen."

"You rescued Will?" Hannibal kept his voice level, as he seethed inside.

"No, actually, Will rescued himself. He was holding a weapon, a potato peeler I believe and I remembered being bewitched by his Southern drawl as he said *"Touch me again, you pile of shit and I'll fucking gut you."*

"So, Antony, why keep this from me?" Hannibal was simultaneous proud his Omega had defended himself and angry an attempt to molest the boy had occurred within the sanctity of their home.

"It was Alana's birthday and knowing full well, had you been told, you may have ripped off her fiancé's head and mounted it on your office wall, Will and I agreed it could wait until morning. The next day Alana discovered her future husband had been screwing her best friend and it seemed cruel to pile on more misery."

The look on his sister's face when she heard the news flashed into Hannibal's mind. "You should have told me."

"You are volatile, Hannibal. I've known you all these years and yet even I can't predict how you would react to someone touching Will." Antony leaned forward and whispered. "You do realise I adhere to protocol whenever I'm around your husband. In fact all your friends do."

"I have no reason not to trust you with him." Hannibal said with a look of surprise.

"If Will had been Beta or Alpha I would have treated him differently but because of his Omega status I keep Will at arm's length." Dimmond caressed the stem of his glass. "I feel sorry for him. I am sure he is under the impression your friends are standoffish when in fact it Is our cowardly attempt at survival. It is much easier to treat Will as a fragile little teacup than to try to pal up to him and risk a beating."

"You are suggesting I am over- protective of Will."

"Actually, I would say overly- possessive. I remember that New Year's Eve party at the Challoner's house. You and Will turned up fashionably late and all the eyes in that room turned to you as you made your entrance. You looked handsome, as always but Will was exquisite, with his curls framing his face and that damned collar catching the light. This little Omega in a room full of Alphas shyly ducking his head whenever someone spoke to him, made everyone want to protect and embrace him, until they saw the look on your face." Antony laughed, just loud enough for the other diners to notice, but several degrees below irritation level. "Will is one hundred per cent real, neither phony or calculating, he is naturally modest. And that, my friend, is what makes him unique and desirable within our circle. All your wealth and importance could disappear overnight and Will Graham would stay by your side because he loves you. If I had someone in my life who felt that deeply about me, I would also keep them locked away."

The memories of the party surfaced, how they had returned to Chandler Square rather than face the long drive back home. Hannibal seated in his favourite leather chair looked from his vacant lap to the boy.

"Come here." He demanded and the Omega, smiling seductively, obediently crossed the room.

The gentle kissing and petting escalated after Will pulled him into the bedroom. Provoked by the looks of lust thrown his Omega's way during the evening, he quenched his anger and claimed ownership by fucking the boy, deep and hard.

"I am not Will's jailer." Hannibal declared. "I designed and built a house on the fringes of the Omega sector for us to make our home, but it was Will who wished to continue living with

my parents. Perhaps, in hindsight, it was the right decision as Will has continued his education and assisted my father with his book."

"Believe me, Hannibal, once you are on the slippery slope of separation, it's downhill all the way."

Hannibal returned late from the dinner to a silent house and quickly settled in the guest room. Originally the DuMaurier bathroom it had been converted during the second pregnancy and it was where Hannibal had elected to sleep since learning of Will's deceit.

"It creeps me out." Will had finally admitted to Bedelia when she discovered he avoided the bathroom.

Immediately changes were implemented, the bathroom into a bedroom, the walls in the hallways were painted cream and the old varnish on the wooden beams was removed exposing the natural grain. After years of hesitation before allowing even minor alterations to the interior, Bedelia was now on a mission. Subconsciously choosing colours which were predominantly used in Omegan homes, she highlighted Will's standing within the Lecter family.

Staring at the ceiling, Antony's words wormed into Hannibal's imagination and picturing Will being harassed, the simmering in the Alpha reached boiling point. He wanted to march into the Omega's bedroom, shake him awake. Yell at him that it was the Alpha's duty to protect him and that Wetherly was now a marked man. He understood Will's reasons for hiding the incident, Alana's fiancé would not have survived the Alpha's fury.

Hannibal shifted position to lie on his side as thoughts tumbled through his mind. With the threat of his marriage becoming a public sideshow, he knew papering over the cracks was futile and he urgently needed to act on his intentions.

It was Will's spark that attracted him, meek on the outside, but in certain circumstances, he could become scrappy and combative. Hannibal's mind skipped back to their earlier days. Proud when Will attempted to overcome his shyness at social functions, he began to honour the Omega by not being emotionally sober towards him in public. Small steps which, in his mind, had signified a shift in power. From dominant and submissive to equals.

To keep on pushing Will into making decisions without deferring to him was the catalyst for all their problems and the Alpha knew, he alone, owned that mistake. It soon became obvious, by taking the initiative, Will was making serious miscalculations but by then it was too late. The fall out from the Omega's missteps had hurt everyone. As he rolled onto his back, promising himself tomorrow he would make amends, Hannibal still found the ache from one of Will's mistakes palpable.

Six months earlier

"They're growing up elitist." Will had said. Tired of the same discourse, the Alpha had reluctantly agreed to the boy's demands. Rather than an exclusive resort, Will had trawled the

internet and found a family friendly hotel for their vacation. Mostly they had enjoyed themselves; riding the Amtrak, taking the bus tours even eating in a burger house, which in the Omega's opinion, normalised their children.

With his hands full by taking sole responsibility for the twins, Will did not notice, but Hannibal had caught the personality shift in Andrius. Sitting on the boy's bed, outlining their itinerary for the next day, Hannibal had enthused over the wildlife sanctuary they had visited without gaining much response.

Pushing the strands of hair away from his son's brow, Hannibal inquired. " You seemed to have lost your smile, Andrius, perhaps it is hiding and we can find it together. If you tell me what is wrong, maybe I can fix it and your smile will return."

Andrius had been hesitant but with a hushed stuttering he asked. "Daddy, what's a freak?"

Hannibal sat powerless as his son, in fragments, related how the woman who had bumped into Will, had spewed the insult "you filthy freak."

"Papa's not dirty. He smells good." The child protested.

"What did Papa say?" Hannibal asked as he gently embraced his son.

"Papa said some people are stupid and we shouldn't mind them." Andrius snuggled deeper into his father's arms until he could press his cheek against his father's chest before whispering his long held secret. "The boys at school call Papa that name. He's why they don't like me."

"You must tell William." Robert had blustered when, on their return, Hannibal had confided in his parents.

"How can I?" Hannibal's emotions waivered between anger and despair as he relived his son's pain. "If he knew the truth, he would be devastated."

"I knew this vacation would be a mistake." Robert paced back and forth. "You could go to the school, speak to the teachers...."

"I have contacted the administrator at the Alpha Doceo in Baltimore who was very understanding and he has agreed to take Andrius. He will start his new school after the summer recess."

"William will not understand. It was he who insisted Andrius go to a school where he could mix with the local children." Robert breathed in deeply, remembering his blood pressure. "He will believe you are undermining him."

"Then let him. I will not tell him that his son has heard the pupils at his school refer to Will as a freak." Hannibal said adamantly.

"Very well." Robert said. "But I am warning you there will not be a happy outcome if William finds out the truth second hand."

"Will is struggling, father, because of this pregnancy. When the time is right, I will sit down with Will and tell him the truth, until then, let the truth rot in hell."

Hannibal woke to the sound of Tomas greeting the dawn in his usual manner by bawling. Hannibal could envisage Will wearily rolling off the sofa couch and picking up his son, holding him close until the sound of his purring soothed the child. Donning his robe, Hannibal opened the door and crossed the hallway into his old bedroom directly opposite. Seeing the bed devoid of any linen made the anger fire up inside of him before he extinguished it with thoughts of the children.

Under the forceful stream of water from the showerhead, he concentrated on his work schedule to prevent his mind concocting an apology. Anything carefully rehearsed would appear false and for once, he didn't mind denting his image by floundering.

Hair roughly towel dried and dressed in weekend casual, he tapped lightly on the connecting door. As he turned the handle, a jolt of nervous tension shot through him and he huffed out a laugh when he realised he was afraid. Will stood in the centre of the room holding his son who was fascinated by the lock of the Omega's tousled hair he had grasped.

"Will, we need to talk." Hannibal began.

Chapter End Notes

Abridged summary of the conclusions of Professor Charles (geneticist) on the evolution of the dynamics.

(1) The Alpha males was the biggest predator of the dynamics followed by his female counterpart.

(2) The limited fertility window of the female Alpha forced the male Alphas to mate with the other dynamics.

(3) As an Alpha Beta mating could only produce Beta offspring, this pairing was infrequent.

(4) Smaller and passive, the Omegas were easily overpowered. The Omega females when bred produced either Omega children or children with the same dynamic as the sire.

(5) A bonding gene evolved between Alpha males and Omegas (all sexes) in order to keep the Omegas co-dependent.

(6) Later chromosomal evolution divided the Omegas into male, female and duals. With the combination of the male physique, softer features and the ability to give birth, the duals were emotionally compelled to seek out the stronger Alpha male, the only dynamic able to impregnate them.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wearing just his boxers and a tee, Will felt disadvantaged and assumed his best poker face. In the past, Will knew he would have been sorrowful and tearful, quick to give or beg forgiveness but living with the biggest Alpha on the block, Will was now made of sterner stuff.

"Will, we need to talk." The Alpha repeated. "Perhaps after breakfast."

Will reminded himself his only armour was mirroring the Alpha. "And that is because.....?"

"For the sake of the children."

"The children." Losing the curl, Tomas began to whine until Will tilted his head so he could reach another.

"And for us." Will half expected the Alpha to stride towards him, pull him close and murmur an apology through the kisses but this time he never moved, his eyes locked onto the Omega as if waiting for permission. "I am aware I treated you harshly, perhaps was even cruel but I believe the time is right to rectify the rift between us."

"Yeah, you're right." Will manoeuvred the fidgeting Tomas. "You were cruel."

"At the time my anger was justified."

"I apologised but that wasn't enough for you. You had to punish me by not talking and now...." Will took a breath. "So what's changed?"

"Over dinner with Antony, he reacquainted me with the damage inflicted on him during his parent's divorce. It would also appear we are the focus of the local gossips who have suggested we are heading in that direction."

Will weighed up whether it was Antony's past or the gossips which bothered the Alpha the most. "So not an apology, more a truce."

"An attempt to build bridges."

"You incinerated them when you said I was wrong to have another child when I couldn't cope with the three I already had." The words had cut deep at the time and still stung the Omega as he said them.

"I have deeply regretted saying those words but do not forget you lied to me, Will, and you have to share some of the blame."

The same old impasse with both of them standing their ground, Will took the decision to give way. "Okay, we'll talk after breakfast. So if you'll excuse me, I need to shower and get Tomas dressed."

It was the opening Hannibal had needed and Will had willingly presented it. The Alpha crossed the room and carefully took his son from the Omega's arms. "I will attend to him."

Will had barely taken three steps to the bathroom when he heard the Alpha's voice. "I have missed you, Will."

Will hesitated, mindful that to lob a spiteful barb would be counterproductive, he replied. "I've missed you too, Han."

Solitude was a luxury as Will was nearly always on duty. If one of the children were hurt or unwell, they would seek his immediate attention except when Hannibal was home, then the Alpha became their first port of call. Will had no objection to the demotion, it gave a modicum of time for self indulgence and he revelled in the knowledge that his offspring saw both parents as a source of comfort. Alpha sires were notorious for the ability to remain aloof with the fruit of their loins but around their children Hannibal was a warm and loving father.

With the shower insulating him from the world, his mind drifted deep in the woods and Will could vividly recall one of the times he had lost his way. Looking back before his last heat, he was not sure if he muddled the days when to take his birth control pills accidentally or accidentally on purpose. When the risk of impregnation was high, Omegas experienced a heightened excitement during knotting, inducing a hyper-erotic state. Coupled with the nagging yearning to hold a newborn and drown in unconditional love, Will had accepted the possibility his Omegan biology had lured him into abandoning all common sense.

He had regretted lying, inferring the pills may have been defective, instead of just admitting he had made a mistake. He hadn't wanted to seem irresponsible but suggesting the manufacturing process may have been faulty had sent the Lecters into a loop. Robert used his contacts, spoke to groups of Omegas saddled with unplanned pregnancies until he became confident that a class action against the pharmaceutical company would succeed. It was at this point of no return, Will applied the brakes and confessed. For his part, Robert had been understanding but for Hannibal the smouldering had begun.

One more child, he and Hannibal had agreed after the birth of Andrius, then their family would be complete. Soon the tell tale aroma of pregnancy overpowered Will's natural scent and during his first scan, instead of looking at one baby, they saw a stowaway as well. Everything seemed textbook standard but fifteen days before the due date, Will found himself in hell. The blood flowing down his thighs, his cries ripping through the household, would later form part of the nightmares which jolted him awake. Hannibal had gently carried him to the car then driving towards Baltimore they met the ambulance halfway. The first girl arrived as the vehicle parked outside the emergency entrance and as Will was rushed into the operating room, the second little Omega made her appearance before the c-section could

begin. Sitting silently in the NICU watching the tiny infants breathe, he had been grateful the Alpha had taken complete control. Emotionally and physically exhausted, Will had been shrouded in numbness, unable to muster hope. Hannibal had asked the pertinent questions, cajoled him into eating and held him when he broke.

"Will, no more children." Hannibal had said after they had brought the girls home. "If I had lost you, our daughters ..... I could never outrun the pain."

As Will dressed, the long-forgotten conversation flashed through his mind and he was swamped by a sudden surge of guilt.

"Bloody woman!" Will heard his father-in-law mutter as he drew up alongside him in the hallway. "You would think Zeller had been snatched from our arms by child protective services not living in Sutcliffe house. She's now in print as well as online. I wouldn't let a dog poop on her publication. Unfair on the poop."

Will did not need to be told who the woman in question was, only Lounds drew out such a reaction from Robert. Will linked arms with the Alpha and slowed down the pace as he whispered. "Don't let the Countess hear you, you'll get into trouble."

Robert's recent fall had caused his gait to become unsteady and the Omega stayed close until they reached the dining room where the Alpha used the back of the chairs for support as he made he way around the table. The children, already seated, chirped a good morning to their grandfather as he sat down.

Staring at the breakfast bowl in front of him, he asked. "What's this?"

"Authentic Scottish porridge." Bedelia replied as she entered the room carrying her plate. "It's proven to lower cholesterol."

"Porridge?" Robert looked around the table taking inventory of the other fare on the table then repeated incredulously. "Porridge?"

"Stop being childish, Robert." Bedelia sighed. "The doctor warned us that your cholesterol level is high."

"Slightly higher than average." Robert corrected. "He told you to improve my diet not give me prison rations. The grim reaper isn't tapping impatiently on the door wanting to whisk me off in his handcart."

Sitting on the right of the Alpha, Andrius piped up. "Grandfather, I'm eating porridge too. Not only is it yummy but it's good for you."

Will leaned back in his chair and chuckled, remembering the numerous occasions Robert would encourage the children to eat their vegetables by using the exact words. As Hannibal placed the plate of scrambled eggs in front of him, Will looked up and gave his Alpha a thank you smile then returned his gaze towards Robert. Dipping his spoon into the mixture and

bringing it too his mouth Robert gave out an exaggerated hum of delight to satisfy his grandson.

"Yummy." He enthused as he shot Bedelia a sideways look.

Will loved the Alpha and held a deep appreciation for all the support Robert had given him over the years. He had often tried to analyse their relationship, not quite father and son but far more than mentor and pupil. The Alpha had never criticised him when he had made mistakes, just gently nudged him in his soft and dusty way, until the Omega was back on the right path.

Only once had Will seen Robert completely lose his temper. The volcanic force behind the outburst had left the Omega frozen in place, forcing him to continue to observe the heated duel of words between Zeller and his father. Zeller's decision to switch to pathology rather than continue with general medicine hadn't fooled Will. His interest in law enforcement since his visit to Quantico had increased tenfold and the occasional questions thrown in Will's direction regarding the FBI had given his end game away. Of course, Robert and the others had accepted Zeller's explanation for his change of direction; that too much expectation had been placed on his shoulders. The reams of paper used to extol the accomplishments of the Sutcliffe family in the medical world could fill a stadium. While Zeller admired their achievements, he accepted his limitations and had no desire to try to climb the dizzy heights reached by those to whom he was related.

With Robert voicing his opinion professorship and a teaching position would be a worthy return for his son after investing years in dedicated study, Zeller's announcement he had joined the FBI started an argument of epic proportions. Erupting in Robert's office, it soon spilt into the hallway where Robert chronicled the number of agents killed or injured in the line of duty since the agency's conception.

"I'm based in the lab dealing with the dead not the undead. I'm not shooting it out with fucking zombies." Zeller had blasted.

Storming towards his office, a red-faced Robert had raged in retaliation. "When you have children, you'll soon discover, you spend most of your life worrying about the ungrateful bastards."

With the sound from the slamming door filling the hallway, Zeller had paced before he calmed. Turning to the shell-shocked Omega, he bristled. "Don't tell me he's upset because he loves me. I already know."

Will was discovered by Hannibal sitting in a corner of his meditation room. After gentle persuasion, the Omega disclosed how the discord had revived distressing memories from his past. Hannibal had noticed that Will became jittery when, on the odd occasion, tempers flared between family members but discovering him huddled and shaking, experiencing the full emotional brunt from exposure to raw anger, compelled the Alpha to protect his mate. Immediately brokering a ceasefire between the warring Alphas, the disagreement was swept deftly under the carpet and the household was again swathed in harmony.

Zeller had been warned some cases would haunt him and early into his employment he had not gauged how one investigation would rule his life. When the bodies of young Omega boys wrapped like Egyptian mummies were discovered at regular intervals, Zeller desperately sought the killer, spending his free time trawling through the files hoping to find an overlooked clue. Robert, keeping a close eye on the case, would sit in his office respectfully listening when his youngest son needed to unburden himself. As the body count rose and an appeal broadcast in an attempt to shake lose any information the public may hold, Will easily imagined the killer's feeling of contempt towards the FBI as they failed to see him in the undergrowth. It was Will's first step into the mind of the perpetrator and not satisfied with just skirting around the edges, he gathered enough information to delve deeper. Never believing there would be repercussions, he drew up a profile of the man responsible and delivered an account, going past rational limits, detailing the modus operandi of the maniac. Zeller became the go-between, passing the information onto Crawford who in return, came a-calling, inadvertently creating a rift between the Omega and his Alpha.

"a boy not much older than your son, the worst part is telling the parents" Jack played Hannibal until the man was coerced into agreeing that not allowing Will to participate was tantamount to aiding a murderer. *"Will is unique, he saves lives."* Given access to the FBI's files, Will took a day to become acquainted with the long list of suspects until he found among the paperwork the flip-flopping alibi which sealed the fate of one individual. Not a monster but a non-entity whose wish for immortality ensured the death of the most vulnerable. While the names of the victims were soon forgotten, a low-life was guaranteed his name would always be remembered, thanks to the hunger of the media.

After Lounds heralded Will's involvement, Crawford called a press conference to contain the damage and hunted for the source who had been cosying up to the rodent press. Presented as the hero profiler who had identified the killer, an uncomfortable Paul Jorgensen spun half-truths, half-lies and all things in between to protect the Omega. Stung by the public rebuttal, Lounds hit back and rehashed the old stories centred on Will's kidnapping, contorting them into a twisted love affair between Hobbs and an underage Omega. Waking up and finding himself headlined in TattleCrime, Will faced the stark realisation that he alone had brought unwanted attention to the Lecter family.

"Nobody will believe her. She cannot harm your reputation." Robert had tried to reassure the Omega but the cold hard stare emanating from Hannibal told Will the broadside from the hack had hit home.

"Never again." Hannibal caught Will by the arm as they left the sitting room. "If Jack Crawford calls upon you, he will have to seek help elsewhere."

"You lied to me, Will." Seated in the sunroom the Alpha had elected to speak first. Dressed in a black shirt and pants, Hannibal now favoured shorter hair and designer stubble. Will blushed in the knowledge, the Alpha's scent and full attention had coaxed him into arousal.

"Uh huh." Will looked down at his entwined fingers feeling awkward and shy. "Twice."

"You knew how I would react."

"Yep." Will nodded. "Badly."

"Then why lie?" Hannibal inspected the Omega, starting at the top of his head then down the whole length of his body.

"The first time I was scared to tell you the truth." Will raised his head and stared directly at the Alpha. "The second time you had pissed me off so I thought what the hell."

The Alpha sighed deeply. "And due to your lies we have reached a situation where no one is happy."

"No, not entirely due to my lies." Will retorted. "We reached this situation due to your intractability and the fact you have hoards of women throwing themselves at you."

"I gave you solid reasons as to why I do not want you to work for Crawford."

"Yeah, and because of my Omega status I have to comply. Let's not pretend it isn't a factor. An Omega married to an Alpha cannot be employed by the FBI without written consent from the Alpha."

"I did not make the rules, Will." The Omega felt a rise of anger at the injustice.

"I was given an opportunity and you blocked me." Will became aware he was snarling out the words and tempered his tone. "Three months, Hannibal, two days a week for just three months and you said no."

"I said no because of the danger. You are clueless with regard to Crawford's machinations."

"Geez." Will exclaimed. "You sound like your father when he found out Zeller had joined the Bureau. These are cold cases. I'd be at Quantico stuck in an office talking to agents. The only injuries I'll get are from paper cuts when I leaf through the files."

"Jack Crawford is not a man to waste an opportunity. He will use you and not give a damn about the consequences." Hannibal glowered. "All you can envisage is a chance to follow your dream."

"Or get it out of my system." Will leaned forward, his hands resting on his thighs trying to look sincere. "You told me I was immature and have created a fantasy world FBI. So what if you're right? If I face reality and find out what I believe doesn't exist, then I can concentrate on something else. Perhaps charity work or even become an advocate like you suggested."

Hannibal smiled. "Your manipulation techniques are good. You think by dangling the thought of you following my suggestions, I would view favourably your arrangement with Crawford."

The Omega shrugged. "It was worth a shot."

Hannibal gave out a laugh, seemingly amused. "I am surprised you have not pointed out that because I publicly supported my uncle when he expanded the rights of Omegas, restricting you makes me a hypocrite."

"Actually, I was saving that for last."

Will saw the kick of light in the Alpha's eyes, as he gazed at the Omega with unbridled fascination. "Have I caged you, Will? Is that why you wrestle for control."

"I've caged myself and we both know it."

Will could see from Hannibal's expression he had agreed with the statement. "Do you realise I've never been alone. Both here and at the Sanctuary, I've been constantly surrounded by people who looked out for me. You had space growing up, I didn't want it. Was always too scared, you know why, so perhaps subconsciously that's one of the reasons I got pregnant. Gave me another excuse not to leave the home and in anybody's book, that's not healthy."

"I built you a house, Will, but you did not want it."

"I know and I regret my decision." Will sat back and let the honesty flow. "Outside of the family, I don't have any friends except for Holly who we share. Can you understand what's it's like for me when we socialise. Your friends are all Alphas and when I try to talk to them either their eyes glaze over or they keep their distance. The ones married to Omegas, that's even worse. Their Omegas insist on giving me beauty tips or go on and on about their vacations."

"You feel minimised."

"More like an uneducated, unworthy miscreation."

The words hung between them. A drunken insult levelled at Will by an Alpha on the margins of high society who had berated Hannibal for marrying beneath him. "You should not brood over words spoken by an intoxicated fool."

"Hard not to, especially when my empathy told me some of your friends agreed with him." Will replied coldly. "The Omega protests in Chicago changed me. Made me realise cause I'm tagged Omega doesn't mean I have to accept being treated like a third class citizen."

"And so you reached out to Jack Crawford to show your worth."

"You can't ignore the statistics, Hannibal." Will protested. "Where cold cases are concerned, if the victims are Omegas, they stay closed. Chicago was the tip of the iceberg. No wonder the FBI was tasked to take over the cases. I reached out because Omegas were not being served by the justice system."

"Are you not flattering yourself, Will? Suggesting that within the halls of justice you alone will make a difference?"

"A contribution. Alana and Frederick are far more active than me within the Omegan rights movement."

"They have found religion and a chance to attone. Both have profited from their Alpha connections and protocol." Hannibal replied sarcastically.

"Yeah, the same protocol which states because I'm Omega you can't kiss me in public or insists I walk three steps behind my Alpha on certain occasions." Will snapped out.

"Alphas believe flaunting their Omegas leaves them open to attack." Hannibal snarled in return. "Omegas have found their voice, but they should be careful how they use it during their break for freedom otherwise they may create resentment."

The tone was scalding and Will recognised a warning had been issued. Despite his thoroughbred status, Will had witnessed Hannibal frequently ignoring protocol. Will ducked his head. "I'm sorry, I got a little mad there. You're not to blame. I kinda get impassioned now that Omegas in the north are finally trying to take full ownership of their lives."

"As are you." Will saw the small fracture in the Alpha's resistance. "Do you believe you are as good as the many experienced investigators the FBI has in its stable?"

"As good? No." Will replied. "I'm unique. I have a particular skill set which sometimes makes me better."

It was the spark of confidence in the Omega's voice which filled the Alpha with pride. With only two choices, either go with the flow or quarantine his Omega from outside influences, Hannibal calculated the risks.

"I cannot approve of you working for Crawford." Will felt the familiar sinking feeling inside. "But neither will I prevent it. You no doubt have the necessary paperwork for me to sign."

In another setting, Hannibal would have found his Omega's squeal of delight amusing. "However, there will be certain conditions. First I need assurances....."

"I'm sure Jack will agree...." Will began excitedly.

"No, Will." Hannibal interrupted. "The assurances must come from you. You must keep me informed about the type of work you are undertaking. I will not tolerate you working in the field."

"Agreed."

"If Jack asks you to cross the boundaries I have set, I must believe you will reject his request."

Will nodded his head. "Believe me, I'm not gonna put myself at risk or let someone else do it to me."

"Any intervention from me has to be acknowledged as justified and will be seen as protective not undermining. Any transgressions and I will withdraw my consent. No court of appeal. My decision will be final and I will expect no arguments." As the Omega nodded, Hannibal gave the boy a quizzical look. "Tell me, if you had not needed my consent, would you have agreed to work for Crawford?"

"Yes." Hannibal's expression stayed emotionless, as if the answer was the one he expected. "I would have explained my reasons and hoped you'd understand."

"Then I hope you understand I have always attracted the opposite sex but it does not necessarily mean I have to act on it." The Alpha rose from his chair. "No doubt Lounds published the photographs to cause mischief."

"Guess my outbursts meant she succeeded." The Omega remarked sheepishly. "It's just you looked so darned happy with those beautiful women draped over you."

"They lacked a certain quality." Hannibal looked down at the Omega. "Only bubbles no champagne."

"Yeah, the way they were dressed you could sure see their bubbles."

"You may have considered them attractive, Will, but they failed to meet the only criterion which would guarantee my attention."

"What's that?" Will inquired, getting to his feet.

"They were not you."

Beet red, Will lowered his head in modesty. As he struggled to find an appropriate response, he recalled part of the letter Hannibal had written him when he had sunk into a trough of depression after the twins had been born.

"I cannot wear my heart on my sleeve, Will, therefore I may not show, to your satisfaction, the necessary affection you require. In my defence, I can only say, I have not as yet found the words which can sufficiently express the depth of my feelings for you."

As they made their way out of the room, Hannibal suddenly turned and placed his hand against the wall blocking the Omega's path. As his other hand brushed through the Omega's long curls and settled around his neck, elegant fingers began to caress the area at the base of his skull. As his skin began to tingle and a shiver ran down his spine, Will gazed into deep brown eyes.

"I have missed your warmth both physically and emotionally." Hannibal murmured. "Tonight I will sleep in our bed and I expect you to join me."

Chapter End Notes

Abridged summary of the conclusions of Professor Charles (geneticist) on the evolution of the dynamics.
Appendix: Biological studies - Sexual Pheromones

Within the Alpha hierarchy, the thoroughbred is considered supreme. The product of several generations of Alpha/Alpha pairings, a thoroughbred has a higher testosterone level than other Alphas as well as excessive androstenone and androstadienone levels. The functions of these is to attract a mate with a distinguished pedigree.

The thoroughbred's counterpart within the dynamics is the pure Omega. Generations of Omega/Omega pairings produce the pure whose scent is stronger than the average Omega. All Omega duals are pure and recent studies show their scent is the most powerful and possibly addictive.

Chapter 3

Months before he exits the White House, speculation is rife as to whether President Donald Sutcliffe has already mapped out his post presidency career. A distinguished surgeon before he entered the presidential race, Sutcliffe has always maintained he would walk away from the political arena after his second term. So is resurrecting his former career on the horizon? Those closest to him have suggested he would prefer involvement with an Omegan aid programme or even just "chill out" before writing his memoirs. With a biography about his early years written by his brother-in-law, Robert Lecter, already an international best seller, another book is guaranteed success. However, rumours abound that if James Hayden Tier wins the race to the White House, Sutcliffe may be asked to stay on as an adviser to help ease his young friend into the presidency. Although Sutcliffe's popularity with Beta voters slumped over his decision to take executive action to enforce positive discrimination of Omegas within Federal departments, he still commands universal praise for his sweeping changes which enhanced Omegan rights. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and received several other humanitarian honours after his exceptional diplomatic artistry persuaded the voters of South Carolina - a state which denied Omegas the right to vote - to join with the North.

DIANA COSTELLO

POLITICAL EDITOR

OMEGAN TRIBUNE

Will instinctively woke before the first cries commenced. Wriggling free from the sleeping Alpha's tight hold, Will comforted, changed then ultimately fed Tomas before settling him. Will even managed to shower before Hannibal's eyes opened to the new day.

"You are keen." Hannibal yawned.

I don't want to keep Zeller waiting. Why the hell did they have to officially screen me at the crack of dawn?"

"Perhaps if Jack had not rushed you into the Bureau, things could have been arranged at a more convenient time."

Will chose not to respond, preferring to concentrate on the here and now rather than get into a potentially lengthy debate.

"I'm gonna grab some breakfast." The Omega muttered, hoping the knots in his stomach would untie.

Hurriedly showering and dressing, Hannibal surprised Will in the hallway, carrying his barely touched plate of eggs back to the kitchen.

"I wasn't very hungry." Will looked sheepishly through his curls. "I'm going to spend some time with the children."

His own appetite affected, Hannibal picked at his breakfast until his brother's arrival. Electing to fetch the Omega, Hannibal followed the sound of low pitched purring and discovered Will in the twin's bedroom, looking down fondly at the two girls.

"Zeller is here."

Will raised his head and although it was fleeting, the Alpha had seen on the boy's face a reluctance to leave. Hannibal didn't need Will's gift of empathy to understand the Omega's dilemma. Pulling the boy closer, Hannibal kissed him first delicately then passionately, ensuring the sensation would not be easily forgotten.

"Everyone will be here, Will, safe and sound when you return home." The Alpha whispered.

Hannibal stood in the doorway until the car reached the end of the driveway, quietly cursing Crawford for fast tracking Will's appointment as a special consultant.

"I was considering waving him farewell but then I felt I would be behaving as if it was William's first day at school." Robert called to his son.

"There are strong similarities." Hannibal turned and walked down the hallway to where his father was standing. "Crawford arranging that Zeller act as chauffeur has put Will at ease. I was just about to prepare breakfast for the children. If you want another coffee, I will gladly bring it to you."

"You intend to cook for them as well as care for them during the day?"

"I am more than capable, father." Hannibal replied good-naturedly. "I have often looked after them by myself."

"Yes, for a few hours not a whole day." Robert snorted. "Besides Mrs Foster always cooks breakfast during the week and you may upset her routine."

"I have spoken to her. She is quite happy for us to co-exist in the kitchen two mornings a week."

"You have also re-arranged the school run." Robert grumbled.

"Yes, I will take the children to school. I believe in the short term it will ease the burden on you and mother." Hannibal smiled.

"Looking after one's grandchildren is not a burden." Robert huffed.

"It will also give me the opportunity to remind certain pupils that Andrius has more than one parent."

"Heart rate within normal parameters." Doctor Lloyd Bowman said as he peeled off the pads holding the wires to Will's chest. After Will sat back down on the examination table, Bowman carefully pulled the strip from the right side of the Omega's neck, giving the scar on the left side a casual inspection. "Could have been worse."

"They said higher up and I wouldn't have survived." Will caught the towel Bowman tossed him after the Alpha had reached the equipment bay and watched as Bowman placed the strip into the odorant biosensor positioned on the counter.

"Was he trying to cut your throat or cut out your left bonding gland?" Bowman switched on the machine and took a step back.

"Hard to say. At first I thought my throat, now I'm not too sure." Will wiped the sweat from body. "Hobbs killed his daughter efficiently so he either wanted me to survive or I got lucky."

Bowman made a humming sound after the machine stopped, staring intently at the LED display. "The machine has officially classed your scent as cherry liquor. Before these beauties were invented, the examining physician had to smell the agent. Neck and armpits."

Taking a small canister from a shelf, he walked back to the Omega. "Better use this. Normally I'd offer the use of the shower facilities after a jog on the treadmill but thanks to an engineering malfunction, the heating is abnormally high and the water freezing."

Will looked at the label. "Scent masking?"

"Keep it. You'll be issued with a welcome pack later. Tailored to every agent's needs. Badge, gun, scent masker, blockers, lip balm."

"Lip balm?"

"Exclusively used by those wanting to rise to the top." Bowman sat down behind the desk. "Promotion can mean kissing the right asses. Gotta protect those little lips from getting chapped."

Will studied the Alpha. Tall, masculine, light brown hair fashionably styled, the man took pride in his appearance. The dark blue suit pants and white shirt screamed quality. "As of now your fingerprints, scent analysis and DNA has been officially entered into the database. Handy, should you accidentally contaminate a crime scene."

"I've not signed on to work in the field." Will said flatly.

"The Bureau has a way of changing your mind. I was brought in on a six month temporary contract to set up the Omegan health data base. I'm still here."

How long have you been with the Bureau?"

"Officially two years. Two and a half if you include my temporary posting. One week before my time was up, Doctor Carlos, head of the department keeled over, stone cold dead. I was persuaded to fill his shoes."

"Dead man's shoes." Will grimaced.

"The Omegan superstition. Step into a dead man's shoes and you step into his problems." Bowman said sagely. "Now we have you in the database, think on the bright side. Should you get chopped into pieces and scattered around the countryside, we'll be able to tag you quicker."

Will gave the Alpha a quizzical look. "You're not a typical FBI doctor are you? You're different."

"So are you, so we should get along just dandy." Bowman got up from his chair. "If you put your shirt back on and drop your pants, we can complete the physical."

Seeing Will's expression slowly transcend into a look of horror, Bowman spoke sympathetically. "This is part of the screening process, Will."

Bowman extended his arm, palm upturned. "Do you know how many times I've held Jack Crawford's balls in this hand? I was so god damn anxious the first time, my hand was shaking. I remember Jack growling *"I don't know what you're doing down there, Bowman, but do it quick. The blast from the air conditioning is freezing my ass."*

Will tried to contain the giggling as he fiddled with the buttons on his shirt, trying to push the picture of a half-naked Crawford out of his mind. Taking two deep breaths, he pulled on his zipper and complied with the doctor's request.

"The BAU wanted you urgently so I've covered all the basic requirements. We'll catch up later on the rest. Cough."

Will reddened and felt a wave of relief when the doctor removed his hand and returned to his chair. "All done."

Sweating due to anxiety and the tropical heat blowing from the air vents, Will tidied himself and took the seat opposite the doctor, the desk between them. Bowman looked as dry as a document in spite of the heat. "Part of my duties include making sure all regulations concerning employment of Omegas are followed diligently. In amongst all the paperwork you've been given, there is a map of the building. If you feel uncomfortable using the standard washrooms, there are Omega only pissers on every floor. Any problems you can come to me. I can either act on your behalf or just listen. Everything is covered by doctor patient confidentiality. Should your temporary employment be extended then you'd be

entitled to Omegan Cycle leave. That's in addition to any normal vacation time. In plain English, you get paid leave to accommodate your heats."

"Ah." Will nodded. "The old fuckation."

Bowman grinned. "You're the first Omega I've heard use that term."

"Sorry. Grew up in a rough neighbourhood." Will reminded himself to stop channelling Jimmy Price.

"No, that's good. Be yourself. There's too much pussyfooting going on. Most Omegas want to be treated like a regular agent. That's where things have gone wrong."

"Problems? Thought they'd been ironed out."

"Early days." Bowman replied avoiding specifics. "Approximately forty percent of Omegas leave before completing the full training programme."

"Working here is difficult for Omegas. Like walking a tightrope. You don't want to act too Omega, yet trying to act like an Alpha won't stick for long."

"What about you, Will? Do you think you'll find the right approach?" Bowman asked in a gentle tone.

"I married a strong Alpha. He also advised me to be myself." Will grinned. "So if the other agents like the highly strung, hysterical personality type, I'll be welcomed with open arms."

It took a moment before Bowman caught the humour and laughed out loud. "You're comfortable in these surroundings. I read your file; you were here for about four months."

"Four and a half." Will replied. "Most of that time I hung around Jack Crawford and the BAU team. They rescued me."

"You developed a relationship with them."

Will shrugged. "Guess they were kinda my lifeboat for a while."

Bowman returned his gaze to the computer screen. "Are you on suppressants?"

"Yeah and birth control." Will waited as Bowman tapped the keyboard.

"And your doctor is Tocca, West Point Drive, Baltimore. She's your primary health provider."

"Uh huh. She treats me and the kids." Will snapped out the reply trying to keep pace with Bowman's quick fire questioning.

"You'll have to give a urine sample every fourteen days to show you're taking them."

"Afraid I'll go into heat within these hallowed halls and present myself?"

"One Omega mistimed their heat when some dignitaries were on a tour of inspection. Took two agents to bring the Omega under control and another six to take out the visitors who were on the verge of knotting anyone they could grab." Bowman's mouth twitched into a smile. "Your application form states you have four children. Step children?"

Will shook his head. "No. They're all home grown."

"Which category would you prefer? You can choose from being their carrier, birther or padri."

"In the South we call a dual who has given birth padri, so that gets my vote."

Bowman glanced at the Omega. "Can't be easy being apart from them."

"They're in safe hands. My Alpha has rearranged his work schedule to care for them."

"Omegas invest a lot more devotion and commitment to their children than Alphas."

"Mine's different. He'll see trying to fill my role as a challenge." Will said with affection. "His mantra is never say die. There's no quit to Hannibal Lecter."

Bedelia had assured Hannibal she was willing to return home should he need assistance as only paperwork was waiting for her at the Omega clinic. Between them, they had shooed Robert out of the house into his chauffeur driven car when he had balked at the idea of spending the day at his law firm. As Hannibal watched them depart, being the only adult responsible for the children suddenly struck him as alien and he wondered whether Will's Omegan traits were transforming household.

Having checked the car seats were anchored and that the lunch boxes Mrs Foster had prepared before leaving were in the front well, Hannibal parked his Bentley close to the house. Andrius stood near the door struggling with his jacket until Hannibal casually helped the boy. The Alpha had forethought the risks associated with changing the children's routine but instead of fretting over Will's absence, there was a buzz of excitement around the fact the Alpha was caring for them.

Orderly and calm, Robert had always insisted was the best approach to dealing with the unknown but Hannibal was soon rushing up the main staircase after Gabriella told him that her sister couldn't find one of her shoes. Scouring the girl's bedroom he became aware the minute hand had passed the deadline he had set for exiting the house. Finding the sneaker under the bed, he had raced back down to Willow and manoeuvred the little Omega's foot into the pink and white shoe. Gaining some semblance of order, the children followed Hannibal to the Bentley and offered no resistance when they were strapped into their seats. Glancing at the mirror as they drove away, Hannibal smiled as he caught sight of Willow waving goodbye to the house.

As Andrius scrambled out of the car, Hannibal gazed at the two-storey school building. A former isolation hospital, it still held a cold and clinical aura. Although he appeared

absorbed by the structure, Hannibal widened his shoulders and inflated his chest when he became aware of the sly looks in their direction. The bully, Andrius had told his father, always bumped into him as he approached the entrance. As Hannibal scanned the groups of boys and his son made it uneventfully into the school, Hannibal knew his presence had been duly noted.

Gabriella chattered as Hannibal drove the girls to their elementary school while Willow stayed silent. Mute Omega Twin Syndrome or MOTS was not uncommon in the Southern States but rare in Maryland. Although the girls developed at a similar rate for the first few years, it soon became apparent whereas Ella was exploring the world of verbal communication, Willow preferred abstention. Once Will had tentatively suggested to Tocca there may be a problem, she was obligated by law to enter Willow into the Omegan Child Care system. Initially Hannibal had not been concerned about the battery of tests Willow had undergone, after it had been ascertained her vocal cords were not compromised. Testing her perceptual and cognitive capabilities seemed akin to playing a game however, the girl reacted badly to physical examinations. The showdown occurred when the health board paediatrician had insisted on another blood test and when Hannibal queried whether it was necessary, he discovered the state's decisions regarding the child's welfare could override those of the parents. Hannibal pulled Will's curls from his fearful daughter's fisted hand, as she clung to her Papa in desperation, then positioned her arm while the hypodermic needle pierced her skin. Unable to shake off the way his curly haired daughter had looked at him, her grey eyes filled with fear and betrayal, the Alpha roared at the doctor.

"If you cannot accept the way our daughter was designed, then you are the one with the problem. If you try to see her again, I will not be responsible for my actions."

Speech came infrequently, a *please* or a *thank you* eventually carefully constructed sentences. Overhearing Willow, several times, talking to her siblings when she thought no one else was around, allowed Will to give the family insight.

"She marches to a different drummer." Will explained. "She only talks when she feels she has something interesting or important to say."

The girls pulled him into the school and the smiles and waves from their friends, lifted Hannibal's spirits. Mrs Olyphant greeted each arrival then ushered the child into the classroom, her own infant secured in a sling, nestled against her ample breasts. With a cheery smile she shook Hannibal's hand warmly.

"I'm glad to meet you at last, Mr Lecter. The girls are always singing your praises. On a personal note, it's good to see an Alpha amongst this sea of Omegas."

Hannibal took no offence. Will had often complained about the lack of support offered by Alpha fathers. Happy to dip into their wallets, they seldom helped on a practical level. The Alpha extracted the business card from his jacket pocket, handing it to the teacher.

"My private number. I will be at my Baltimore office for a few hours then I will return home. Do not hesitate to call at any time if there is a problem."

He felt the frantic tugging on his sleeve and looked down at Willow, her wide eyes looking woeful as she chewed lightly on her bottom lip.

"Manners." Hannibal gently reprimanded his daughter. "I promise, Button, I will be here on time to collect both you and your sister."

Turning her head from parent to teacher then back to parent, she said in her whispery voice.

"Daddy, you forgot Tom Tom. He's all alone."

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Omegan News Channel @ 8.00 p.m - Behind the headlines.

Tonight we examine how the abduction of three Omega girls transformed a peaceful vigil into a night of violent protest. We take a closer look at the subsequent Federal investigation into the Chicago Police Department and ask is discrimination against Omegas widespread within law enforcement? As we examine the Chicago Omega riot, we uncover the truth behind the headlines.

Although his mouth was open, Hannibal was completely lost for words after Willow had spoken until he found the wherewithal to mutter to his daughter "*Everything is in hand*." Regaining his composure, he gave a slight shake of the head and flashed a reassuring *"Willow is mistaken"* smile at the teacher. Casually striding from the group, once out of their line of sight, he ran to his car and raced for home. He had driven along this stretch of road countless times, knew the optimum line for every corner, where to slow down and where it was safe to accede the speed limit which was currently his default mode.

The security guard, who had seconds earlier activated the alarm system at DuMaurier House, watched as the Bentley passed between the electronic gates as they began to close. Alerted to a possible threat, the guard checked the road both left and right and confident the Bentley was not being pursued, he turned his attention back towards the house. Watching Hannibal exiting the Bentley, he saw the Alpha running to the house only to suddenly skid to a stop and swoop down as if to retrieve something from the ground.

"Fuck." Hannibal said as his keys dropped from his hand, then "Fuck" again as he leaned over and picked them up.

"Fuck." Hannibal said when he could not get his key into the lock of the front door then "Fuck" again when they slipped from his grasp. Picking them up a second time, he took a steadying breath and managed to open the door. His stomach flipped when he was met by a stony silence as he entered the lobby and a sense of dread enveloped him.

The first wail came as Hannibal dashed up the stairs, the second, higher pitched, as he entered the room. Peering into the crib, Hannibal saw the baby's mouth open, eyes squeezed tight and a tiny-fisted hand waved in the air. The dangers associated with leaving a helpless infant in a cold empty house were conjured up in his head and Hannibal was hit by a wave of unexpected emotion. Contrary to his belief system, Hannibal whispered thanks to his son's guardian angel for watching over the boy and keeping Tomas safe.

"I am so sorry, little one, I am so sorry." Hannibal soothed as he gently lifted the child and fearing the swollen diaper was about to burst, swiftly and smoothly, transported his son to the bathroom.

Always prepared where the baby was concerned, the paraphernalia needed for a diaper change had been carefully laid out by Will before he left home. Placing Tomas on the changing mat, Hannibal removed the boy's clothing then after unfastening the tags, pulled down the front of the diaper. A stream of urine hit him directly in the face then autographed his shirt and grabbing a cloth, he placed it on the baby to contain the flow. Laughing at his own misfortune, Hannibal wiped his chin with the back of his hand and looking down at the silent Tomas, he saw the baby's heart-melting grin.

Will handed Jorgensen the file. "There's nothing to add. You already have your answer."

The Beta's thin lips slid into a lizard smile. "My, my, Will, if you keep agreeing with my conclusions then people may question your usefulness."

Despite the company, Will was savouring the sensation of sitting in Crawford's office. "Was this a test?"

"I was curious whether the youngest hound in Jack's pack could get the old scent back."

Will was impervious to the Beta's famous cold steely stare which had frozen many agents mid sentence and earned him the unfortunate nickname the Gorgon. As another viper speared through Jorgensen's scalp, Will switched off his imagination and stopped himself from grinning. "The husband killed his estranged wife. Her family suspected him but his alibi was solid thanks to his lover. There was only circumstantial evidence to connect him to the crime. Did the family kick up a fuss, Jack, or was it an Omega rights group?"

"The protests exposed sloppy police work. When the Chicago P D handed over their cold cases, the files were stamped by dynamics, kindergarten style. A for Alpha, B for Beta or O for Omega. People lost faith and took their complaints to the Omega Liberation Organisation." Will noticed Jack's cadence of speech had changed now they were *officially* working.

"Jack, this civil rights group is using these victims to publicise their organisation. My guess is some of the families didn't want these cases reopened." Will softened his tone trying to avoid mimicking the Alpha.

"A police department using dynamic profiling of the victims to prioritise cases was enough to fuel the fire." Jorgensen stated. "Discovering only Omega cases were routinely closed down fanned the flames."

"We're on the front line, Will." Jack said aggressively. "President Sutcliffe vowed every case would be investigated. Chicago doesn't have the resources so it became our problem. What we **do not want** is an army of angry Omegas camped on our doorstep believing we are doing a half assed job."

"How many?" Will sighed. "How many of the cases stamped with an O are we investigating?"

"Enough. Ten team members, that includes you, each working twelve cases."

"How many of the team are trainees?" Jack slowly held up one hand and splayed his fingers. Will shook his head in disbelief. "Jack, some of these cases have no age to them. They should be investigated by experienced detectives not by a team that includes five trainees."

"Cases where Omegas were the victims were marked cold when the investigation hit it's first road block. The Chicago Police Department investigated cases involving the other dynamics until all leads were exhausted before cold filing them. Chicago claimed they adopted this strategy because they lacked experienced officers."

"Tossed into storage and forgotten." Will stated.

Jorgensen leaned forward. "Loathe as I am to defend a third rate police department, I must point out their crime rate is high. It's estimated only thirty-five percent of crimes are solved during the initial investigation. Like most departments they cut corners, it's just unfortunate their corner cutting proved to be inspired by blatant discrimination."

"And this case?" Will pointed to the folder. "What happens next?"

"Now our assessment is complete, it will be passed to the Office of the Solicitor General." Jorgensen replied. "An attorney at the OSG will probably suggest to the family they would be better served filing a wrongful death suit against the husband and his former lover who supplied his alibi. Based on experience, she'll cut a deal to save her own skin."

"Our meeting is scheduled for two. It will allow you to meet the rest of the team. As Beverly has volunteered to share her office space with you, she will bring you up to speed." Will glanced at Katz who stood with her back to the wall. Arms crossed and her face outwardly impassive, she couldn't control the roll of her eyes at Jack's words. "So that we are clear, Will, if you a have problem you come to me. My door is always open. I am not going to second-guess you, so don't hide in a closet expecting to be found. That does not mean I will show you preferential treatment or pull the punches if you screw up."

"What about this?" Will lifted the visitors tag attached to his lapel. "Thought we agreed on consultant."

"Couldn't be sure there wasn't going to be a last minute change of mind." Jorgensen stepped in. "Best odds I could get on a no show were three to one."

"You were betting on me not showing up?" Will's incredulity was met with a smile and shrug from Jorgensen.

"You will be issued with a new pass tomorrow along with the standard agent's pack." Jack remarked. "Minus gun."

"Why no weapon?"

"You were the one who insisted on no field work." Jack looked at the Omega bemused. "We haven't the time or inclination to train a temporary in-house consultant."

"I know how to shoot, Jack. After Hobbs nearly killed me, my father-in-law insisted I learned how to use his gun. What's the point of keeping firearms on the premises if you don't know the basics?" Aware he was sitting with experienced field agents Will added feebly. "I've got a completion of training certificate."

"You're full of surprises." Jack studied the Omega as if unconvinced. "Got a weapon of choice?"

"Sig compact." Will was thrown when Jack's expression turned sour.

Jorgensen addressed Jack. "If he clears five cases, let him try FATS. It'll give the kid incentive."

"Isn't that like a virtual reality game?" Will asked.

"Firearms Automated Training System. It's part of the training process for the real FBI." Jorgensen adopted a patronising tone. "If you are a good boy, Will, they may let you play."

"You'll be given an opportunity to attend in-service seminars." Crawford continued, ignoring the banter. "They could be to your advantage, Will."

"What's the point?" Will rebelled, still smarting from Jorgensen's remark. "There is no one here who can teach me how to do what I do."

Will knew instantly he had made a mistake. "Suit yourself." Came the brusque reply as Jack reached for his phone. "If there's nothing else, we're done."

Will became increasingly uncomfortable as they strode towards Beverly's office. His perfectly tailored suit and long hair was garnering attention. Some of the personnel who had passed by them hadn't casually glanced at the Omega, they had ogled and in spite of their scent blockers, he could guess their dynamics by gait or stance. Being objectified made him nervous and he automatically ducked his head. As he walked, Will imagined nailing a sign which read *"Welcome to the Alpha Zone"* above the entrance to the building.

Two corridors away from Crawford and sited near the stairwell, the office was larger than Will had anticipated. Beverly's oak veneer desk was tasteful and functional, on top six files had been neatly stacked. His, by contrast appeared to be a break room reject, cheap and laminated.

"When did you become such a dick?"

"What's your problem?" Will was stunned by Beverly's rebuke. He deposited the files onto his desk with a thump.

"Jack stuck his neck out and you disrespected him."

"Disrespected how?" In desperation, Will tried to recall the meeting.

"He pulled strings to allow you access to refresher courses. They're for qualified agents, dumb ass, not trainees. He was signalling how highly he values you."

"I didn't think, I just re-acted." Will floundered. "I'll go back and apologise."

"Make it worse, why don't you?" Beverly dumped her share of the files she had carried for Will on his desk. "Jack will know I pressurised you."

Will shoved his hands in his pocket, slowly dipping his head.

"Hey." Beverly sang out. "Don't do it, Will, don't do that Omega thing. You know what it does to me."

He looked at her through his curls, the edges of his mouth downturned and received a playful punch on the arm. "Don't give me those puppy dog eyes, Graham."

"Sorry, Bev." Will said sheepishly. "I owe Jack. Just wish he would allow me to express my thanks from to time to time."

"Jack doesn't accepts thanks, insists he was just doing his job. He will always be a stubborn, stoic, emotionally guarded Alpha." Beverly stared towards Will's corner of the office. "About the desk, kiddo, they say they're searching for a replacement. There was a crazy scramble when Jack announced you were joining the team."

"I emailed a copy of the consent form late evening and the next morning an agent was delivering files to my door. Two weeks later and here I am. Does Jack ever sleep?"

"One of the tech guys swears Jack has been cloned. Said he saw Crawford in the Boston office sitting behind a desk barking out orders, another agent reported seeing him working in Seattle." She waved her hand in an arc. "How did Hannibal take to all this?"

"As long as I steer clear of danger he shouldn't present any problems. He may be another stubborn, stoic, emotionally guarded Alpha but when it comes to my safety he's all teeth and claws."

"Someone should have warned Hobbs." Beverly instantly regretted the words as they sprang from her mouth. "Sorry, Will, I didn't mean to rehash the past."

"No, it's okay. I get a bit tired of people skating around the edges." Will hesitated, Crawford's earlier expression still bothering him. "Jack seemed upset when I told him about the gun."

"Jack is smothered by guilt. Believes if he'd acted sooner Hobbs wouldn't have got to you."

"I blame Hobbs not Jack." Will locked Beverly into a stare. "When the cops investigated they found evidence that Hobbs had been stalking me, knew my routine, had rented a place in the middle of nowhere. If he hadn't been panicked into action and stuck to his plan ..... well that's the part I try not to imagine."

The baby's tiny hands and fingernails fascinated Hannibal. Relaxing further into the couch, he tried not to disturb the infant cradled in his arms.

"You're besotted." Alana slipped off her jacket as she entered the sitting room. "The way you are looking at him, you would think you have never seen him before."

"The meetings and travelling have taken up much of my time over the last few months. When I am at home, I have focused more on Andrius and the girls rather than this little man."

"It is considered normal for an Alpha to take a back seat and allow an Omega and their baby to bond during the first three months." The warmth of her brother's smile as he gazed down at his son tugged at Alana's heartstrings. "Unfortunately some Alphas equate taking a back seat with not providing any support. You, on the other hand, have always been proactive with your children."

"Some believe my proactive nature was driven by circumstances. They mistakenly believe the attack on Will forced me to take over the care of Andrius." Hannibal chuckled as Tomas tried to cram his hand into his mouth. "Father frequently looked after us when we were young and it is an example I was keen to follow. I am not concerned if others consider it unconventional, I enjoy being a father."

There was an unspoken understanding the attack on Will by Garrett Jacob Hobbs had changed the way they behaved. Essentially their lives had become before Hobbs and after Hobbs and for a while, the need for absolute security had been their driving force. The electronic gates, which in the past had only occasionally been activated, were both guarded and shut during the day. Keeping Will safe and surrounded by family had dictated everyone's actions and it was Alana who first saw the pitfalls. By perpetuating the idea that the Omega was in danger from an imagined foe had made him a prisoner in the home. The fact Will had voiced no objections elevated Alana's concerns.

"I'm curious? Are we all avoiding talking about Will working with the FBI?" Alana toed off her shoes and slumped into the armchair.

"There is nothing more to discuss. Father and Frederick Chilton were very vocal on the subject and their statements were incongruous with their liberal views regarding Omegan rights. By definition, if I had prevented Will from taking up this post, it would suggest a degree of ownership." Hannibal said wearily. "It appeared my choice was between the devil or the deep blue sea. Instead I chose to trust Will."

The dining area was busy and the flow of people unsettled Will. Rather than interacting with Zeller and Beverly as they sat talking, Will nursed his cup of coffee and listened. Their easy way of communicating with one another suggested more than a professional relationship but Will, suspecting his game was off, refrained from reading them. During the car ride that morning, Will had ranted when Zeller told him they were on the same team, suggesting Zeller had been assigned to babysit the Omega.

"The Chicago medical examiner's office was a haven for drunks." Zeller had explained. "Jack seconded me to check the cases for medical inaccuracies."

Zeller favoured honesty which was one of the reasons Will valued and trusted his brother-in-law. When Zeller pointed out he was in situ long before Crawford had approached Will, the Omega accepted the words without quibbling. The Omega had cringed with embarrassment when Zeller, referring to Will's outburst, added. "Next time, cut out the spoilt princess routine."

Focussing on which persona he should adopt for the meeting, Will re-joined the world when he heard Beverly snarl out a name.

"What's the story behind this Krendler guy?"

"He's liaising between the team and the Department of Justice." Zeller stated. "Climbed his way to the top by taking credit for other people's work."

"He and Jorgensen clash and we get a front row seat." Beverly flashed a mischievous smile. "Keep your head down when the faeces is flying cause neither of them gives a fuck about collateral damage."

With two p.m fast approaching and collectively deciding not to be late, they made their way out of the dining area. Will did not catch the comment made by the person who had shouldered into him but Zeller did and rounded on the man. The exchange was brief and heated, the man's awkward glances were directed at Will. With a shout of *"asshole"* Zeller spun on his heels and marched towards them.

"Let's go." He snapped and walked ahead offering no explanation.

The briefing room was crowded with personnel. Spying the vacant chairs, Will made his way forward with Beverly and Zeller. Conscious that the trainees were watching his every move, Will batted down the instinct to turn tail and hide.

Quietness descended as Jack in an authoritative voice began to speak. He reminded them they were setting standards and were accountable to the Omegan community. He set out the

difficulties they faced and updated them on the Federal investigation. Deep and even, Jack's baritone voice lulled Will into drowsiness. At the mention of his name, Will's eyes were wide open and he was alert.

"Will Graham is part of this team. The official narrative is that he is consulting with the FBI to identify any members of the Hobbs gang who may still be at large. You will not contradict the official narrative. Any leaks to the press about Will Graham will guarantee an investigation by the DOJ. Do I make myself clear?"

Jack paused before continuing. "We are prioritising the killing of journalist Carl Craven. Each of you should have a synopsis of the case."

Jorgensen could not disguise the exasperation in his voice. "What makes this one special, Jack? I've got two cases on the verge of completion."

"A joint request from the Department of Justice and the Director of the Bureau makes it special. Everyone, tomorrow at eleven, be here. Till then, it's back to work."

Walking to the large murder board fixed to the wall, Jack barked out. "Will. Doctor Lecter."

Startled Will sat motionless until Zeller nudged him into action. Sauntering over, Will glanced at the black stencilling against the board's white background.

"Are you up to date with the Craven case?" Jack asked.

"I knew it like the back of my hand, Jack. Just need to get up to speed."

"Why is this case suddenly important, Jack?" Zeller asked.

"When the Director says jump, you don't ask why."

Arms crossed in front of his chest, Jack nodded towards the board. "Tomorrow, I'll need your input, Will. Don't be afraid to open your mouth even if they take pot shots at your theories. Stay on course."

"Getting used to things, Jack. Kinda in a haze at the moment."

"Yeah, saw your eyes were shut when I was talking. Thought maybe I was boring you. Katz told me you've cracked the Elliot case."

Will blushed. "Bev is helping me tie up a few loose ends."

"Sounds like you have got the old scent back." Jack's voice suddenly switched to a softer tone reminding Will of their first encounter. "Go home, Will. Grab some me time then do your homework. If that's okay with you, Doctor Lecter?"

"No problem." Zeller replied. "Got a few things I can handle from home."

Will waited until Jack left the room before speaking. "You don't mind a detour on the way back." He said running his hand through his lengthy curls. "I need to get rid of these."

Feeling for the key in his pocket, the door swung wide before Will could produce it. Will heard the squeals and the sound of running as he crossed the threshold and as they caught sight of him, the three little Lecters stopped in their tracks. Will felt more confident without his long hair. Any doubts over the new look had been quickly dispelled by the stylist and by Zeller. Now scrutinised by his children, Will was tempted to apologise and reassure them his hair would soon grow back.

First came a *"Wow"* from Andrius, followed by a *"You look pretty, Papa."* from Ella, though Will wasn't sure it was the effect he had been hoping to achieve. Willow ran to him and after Will had bent down, she wrapped her arms around his neck and scented him before whispering *"My new Papa*." The floodgates open, he was bombarded by chatter, accepting their hugs and kisses with a huge grin on his face. Once they had calmed, they eagerly followed Hannibal's instructions to return to the sitting room and wait for their Papa.

Hannibal took a long and deep look at the Omega before commenting. "You look very sophisticated."

Will smiled a thank you and pulled off his jacket then placed it on the hook of the hall stand. Hearing the footsteps, Will felt the arms encircle him, heard a low growl of approval before Hannibal feathered his neck with open-mouthed kisses.

Chapter 5

Overjoyed and overheated because Papa was home, the children constantly jostled for Will's attention. With his energy levels dipping, but reluctant to disappoint his offspring by curtailing their time together, Will was soon running on empty. Bedelia weaned the girls away from their Papa by volunteering to bathe them in her bathroom. Full of her perfumes and special bath products, the temptation was too strong and the girls followed their grandmother upstairs. Hannibal distracted Andrius by allowing the boy to wrestle him to the ground. Triumphant from his success, Andrius willingly let the Alpha help prepare him for his bedtime instead of his Papa. Once the children had left the room, Will gave a small sigh of relief and slunk back into the chair.

Will ached for tranquillity. He was dizzy from the day's events, from the change of routine and from the voices echoing in his mind. It was like stepping back to another era, surrounded by people he could not stop reading and could not escape. He ran through his options, he could tell Jack he could not cope and quit, feign illness, but deep down Will was aware he didn't want a way out. When Crawford asked for his input, something had taken root. He had felt elated and energised but above all, he had felt important, a valued member of the team.

As the evening wore on, Hannibal observed his Omega grinding to a stop as the boy tried to make the necessary small talk to keep a conversation going. To anyone but the Alpha, Will seemed his usual self but even Hannibal was never entirely sure which self Will was presenting.

Hannibal insisted Will was in need of a relaxing bath and performed the necessary preparations. Will rested on the bed until summoned then made his way into the bathroom. Testing the temperature with his hand, Will shrugged off the robe and climbed into the tub. As the water covered his shoulders, the scent from the bath oil filled his sinuses and secure in his comfort zone, all the confusion from the day oozed from his brain.

"You're spoiling me." Will murmured to the Alpha.

"Is the water to your liking?" Hannibal asked as he turned on the shower.

"Perfect." Will purred in return. "You'd make a great Omega."

With his back to the Omega, Hannibal removed his robe carefully placing it over the rail and stepped into the shower. Will could not resist and as his eyes glided over the man's back down to his solid ass, Will gave thanks to fate for gifting him such a magnificent man. Under the steamy blanket of water, the Alpha's form was clearly visible and when the glass misted over limiting the Omega's view, Will closed his eyes and employed his imagination. Even if he had been in a consensual frame of mind, his body was too tired to respond, however this did not stop him from delighting in the beauty of the man. The tall muscular Alpha was physically much stronger than the Omega and when rendered powerless in his embrace, Will knew the Alpha could do anything he desired. Outside the heat Will had never

been confident but the Alpha had expanded their sexual horizons by whetting Will's appetite. Will would repeatedly moan his enthusiasm for their newest activity as Hannibal skillfully and effortlessly manipulated the boy's body with his strong elegant hands and hungry mouth.

"Will, come to bed." The voice was inviting and the Omega opened his eyes and saw the Alpha towering over him dressed in pyjama pants.

"I must have drifted." Will said pulling himself into a seated position. "I'll be there soon."

Hannibal moved to the far end of the tub and lifted the lever and Will could hear the water escaping down the drain.

"Spoil sport." Will laughed and accepted the towel the Alpha handed him, waiting until the man left the room before standing.

Will's idiosyncrasies amused Hannibal and although Will was marginally comfortable being seen naked outside the bed, he had never managed to clamber out of the bath tub and look graceful. Quickly drying off, he grabbed his robe and walked into the bedroom. Changing into his night wear he took to his own side of the bed and pulled up the sheet, knowing by morning he would waken to the weight of Hannibal's arm around his waist, keeping him close.

Kneeling at the corner of the desk, Beverly wedged the folded paper under the leg. As Will's shoes came into view, she remarked. "Your table rocks."

"If you like it that much, Bev, we can swap."

Beverly groaned at the attempt at humour as she rose to her feet. Having only briefly glanced up at the Omega, she paused for a longer look. "Oh my god, you look so different. You're all grown up."

With the black pants and shirt topped by a slate grey jacket, Will had toned down as best he could, discovering his wardrobe was somewhat bereft of casual business attire. His anti-glare glasses were a late addition in an attempt to make him appear older than his years.

"Trying to blend in." Will picked up the Elliot file from his desk and flicked it open. His eyes danced over the pages until he found the confirmation. "Hey, I was right. What should I do with it now?"

Beverly found Will's smile contagious. "Take it to Jack. If he thinks it will fly, he will push it forward."

Will could hear the bubble of excitement in her voice. "You're abnormally upbeat. What's going on?"

"Jorgensen has cracked the Warren Park case. Chicago made the arrest." Beverly saw the question mark appear above Will's head. "The three missing Omega girls? The riots in Chicago?"

Not bothering to correct Beverly over her use of the word riot, Will recalled the details of the disappearance of a sixteen-year-old Omega girl on her way home after school. Classified as a runaway by the police, the girl's mother discovered two other Omega girls in the neighbourhood had also vanished in similar circumstances. The peaceful vigil organised by the mothers of the missing girls had disintegrated into a night of violence and radically altered the way their city was policed.

"How did he break the case?"

"Dumb luck. Instead of the detective's report he requested, he was sent the witness statements by mistake. He flipped through them and something stood out."

"What about the girls. Do you think they're alive?" Will asked cautiously.

"Don't get your hopes up, Will. At least the parents may get to know the truth." Beverly's smile was tinged with sadness remembering the first time she set eyes on Will Graham. "The family always need to know, Will, good or bad. There's nothing worse than a perp who won't give up their victims."

Hannibal opened the door before Ardelia had time to push the door bell.

"You are late." Hannibal said, the three children standing in a line behind him watched with fascination at the interaction between the adults.

"You didn't warn me about the road construction near the Sanctuary." Adelia replied with an air of disdain.

"It was on the local news. Drivers have been informed the curvatures are being straightened along this road." Hannibal retorted.

"Yeah, your local news. Don't forget I live north of the city not the posh side." Ardelia smiled at the children. "Hi, kids. Wow, don't you all look smart. Ready for school?"

The children smiled affectionately at Ardelia, accustomed to the executive assistant's no nonsense brand of communication.

"This way." Hannibal strode towards the sitting room with Ardelia in his wake. "I will not be long, if you will look after Tomas until my return."

"Hey, boss, you said I would be working from your home office not baby....." Ardelia saw the tiny bundle in his infant carrier and hurried over. "Oh my god, he's so adorable. He's such a sweet little dude."

"If he needs to be changed you will find all the items you require in my office."

"Go, go, we'll be fine. I know how to look after a baby."

"He has been fed. If he becomes irritable singing soothes him."

"Hey, big guy, I've got five of my own. I can deal with one." Ardelia turned her attention back to the baby. "You and I are going to have a long talk about your grumpy father. Get it all off our chests. Isn't that right, sweetheart."

Jack's secretary waved Will through to the office. Met by guarded looks from three special agents, Will hovered by the door until Jack beckoned him forward.

The Omega tentatively held out the file to Jack as he reached the man's desk. Jorgensen, seated to Will's right greeted the Omega by way of a nod; the man next to him did not.

"Special Agent Paul Krendler." The man stated as way of an introduction, declining to offer his hand. "I intended to approach you at yesterday's meeting, welcome you to the Bureau. Unfortunately, I had urgent business to attend to."

Confronted by the coldest eyes he had ever seen, Will's senses sharpened and for a microsecond he lowered his defenses. Cold hearted, cold blooded, ice water coursed through Krendler's veins and every Omegan instinct warned Will he was someone to avoid.

"Okay." Jack spoke after thumbing through the file. "Convince me you're right, Will."

"Marcus Elliott died from blunt force trauma to the back of his head. His apartment had been tossed and it looked like a robbery gone bad. His family closed ranks, refused to co-operative with the investigation or with any Omega civil rights group trying to highlight the case."

"Why do you think a member of the family killed him."

"Elliott was a small time drug dealer who targeted youngsters. The days leading up to his death he was seen hanging around the local schools. Jack, the robbery was staged. No sign

of forced entry and whoever supposedly robbed the place left behind money and Elliot's drug stash." Will tried to contain his exuberance. "The Elliott family follow strong Omegan traditionalists beliefs. They should be baying for blood but they're not and their eldest son went off the grid soon after Marcus died."

"Elliott was trying to peddle his poison to kids. The family intervened and it went south." Jack recapped.

"Zeller believes the injuries Marcus sustained are consistent with a fall. From the get go the police ruled the case a homicide. If it had been treated as an accidental death then the family would probably have come clean."

"What's the solution, Will?"

"Mr and Mrs Elliott have lost one son, they're not gonna want to lose another." Will spoke haltingly anticipating a negative reaction. "Guess we could do some kinda deal, maybe?"

"I could talk to the assistant district attorney, Jack. She and I seem to have a good working relationship." Jorgensen preened. "See if all parties could reach an amicable agreement."

"This family have potentially withheld vital information, obstructed an investigation." Krendler protested.

"Oh, please." Jorgensen said derisively. "If the family are not concerned about the death of this low life, why would the rest of society give a damn."

Jack pushed the file across the desk towards Jorgensen. "Do it."

"I'm surprised you're working for us." Will could hear the condescension in Krendler's voice. "Omegas nursing their young usually stay within the confines of their home."

"Tomas is fourteen weeks old, our bonding is secured." Will replied defensively.

"The Marcus Elliott case wasn't complex. It appears Agent Crawford may be trying to ease you in." Krendler continued.

"All cases vary." Jack interjected. "I didn't hand pick them for Will or, for that matter, anyone on the team. It's the way they came out of the cookie jar."

"Still, I'm surprised your Alpha let you out of the house." Krendler slowly inspected Will from top to bottom making the Omega uncomfortable.

"You're wasting your time, Krendler, Will is a rich kid, way out of your league." Jorgensen taunted. "I'd keep your rooster in check if I were you."

"Jorgensen." Jack low growled a warning.

"Just telling it like it is." Jorgensen smiled, enjoying his attempt to undermine a colleague.

"What's your next case, Will?" Jack asked diverting the conversation.

"It was Monroe but there was no forensic DNA analysis of the crime scene evidence." Will tailored his style of speech to suit his audience. "I passed it over to Zeller and he's going to make it happen. While I'm waiting for the results, I'm looking at Jerome."

The slow nodding of Crawford's head was usually a sign of his unqualified approval. "You know how bad I want to nail that son of a bitch."

"Uh huh. So do I, Jack." Will loitered, debating whether it was the right moment to broach the subject.

"Is there something else, Will?" Jack inquired.

"The, em, training courses. I was overwhelmed yesterday, didn't think it through. If the offer is still open, I'd like to accept."

"Good. I'll talk to you after the meeting." Will could see by Jack's expression that the Alpha was pleased. "Oh and the new look, Will. It suits you."

"Thanks, Jack." Buoyed by the remark, Will's step had a spring to it as he left the room.

Hannibal leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head. "So we are no nearer finding who hacked the computers?"

Ardelia managed to tear her gaze away from the framed sketches hung on the wall. "I've told everyone they will have to put pen to paper for all confidential work. The system analyst said we aren't the only ones who have been hacked. It may be small comfort but it seems some of our rivals are having the same experience."

"Small comfort is no comfort. It would suggest the experts cannot find the culprits." Hannibal stretched out his long legs then placed both feet on top of his desk. "And the other matter? Have you heard back from your contact in the Marshall Thompson Group?"

"How badly do you want this commission?"

Hannibal replied without hesitation. "To not just design hotels but to transform them into landmarks is beyond most architect's reach. Companies have a tendency to settle for conformity. To create the extraordinary will push me to my furthest limits. I want the challenge and to make my mark."

"You won an international award for your work in Dubai."

"And spent months commuting between home and the Emirates." Hannibal looked to his son sleeping in Ardelia's arms. "Children grow up quickly and I do not want to be separated from them for long periods. Despite the many offers from overseas, I wish to work here in the States."

Ardelia began with trepidation. "According to my friend, the board of directors have compiled a list of architects they favour. Your name is on the list."

"There is a *but* in there somewhere." Hannibal noted the slight change of tone in her voice.

"Don't forget you asked me to sneak around." Ardelia took a deep breath before blurting out. "You only just managed to scrape onto the list. It's not your work that's the problem. It's you."

The Alpha's long and hard stare did not deter the Omega. "The Marshall Thompson Group is in the process of repackaging its own image. Omegas are earning more than ever before and are looking for the high end vacations. That's the market Marshall Thompson is aiming to attract to their new hotels. They want their brand to shout family, family, family. My friend says the publicity shots of you at functions surrounded by women have given the impression you're a lothario."

"Women finding me attractive is beyond my control." Hannibal said with a strong sense of deja vu.

"For the record, I would like to state although some women find you attractive, not all women do and definitely not the one sitting here holding your child." Ardelia declared. "My friend says it's the playboy image which is defining you."

"It is Will and the children who define me." Hannibal replied tersely.

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger." Ardelia snapped. "I conducted my own market research. Asked my friends what they thought of you. The good news is your part in the rebuilding of the Omega sector, your mom and your uncle Donald are your positives. That handsome viz of yours and your intelligence are a bonus. Though one friend did say when you're in town people shouldn't just lock up their daughters; they should lock up their grandmothers as well."

"And the negatives?"

"They thought you were cheating on Will." Ardelia saw an indefinable sadness edge over Hannibal's face. "You can turn this around. Old man Marshall is meeting the candidates on their home ground. Don't be like the rest and take him to a swanky restaurant, go against the tide. You're a fantastic cook so invite him here and let him see you're a family man."

"I will not let my professional life bleed into my private one. I am aware others parade their children as a way of promoting their business. For me that is a step too far."

"That's not what I'm suggesting." Ardelia moved forward in her chair. "Here take the dude."

Hannibal immediately rose and walked over to where the woman was seated. Carefully, he took his son from the Omega's arms. Able to move freely, Ardelia stood, stretched then pointed to the wall.

"These photographs and pencil sketches of Will and the kids, they dominate the room." Ardelia tapped the frame of her favourite. "This one, Will sleeping. His arm tucked under the pillow, the hint of a smile on his lips. I'm no expert, big guy, but I can feel the feels. This sketch screams love and adoration. That's all old man Marshall needs to see."

Krendler took Jack's place in front of the agents after the older Alpha had stood to one side. Gaining and holding their attention by his icy stares, the briefing room stilled as Krendler presented his case.

"Each of you has been provided with a summary of the Craven case. Carl Craven was the third victim of the so-called Parkwood Slayer. Four Omega males killed over a five-month period. The victims had been drugged into oblivion before being savagely knifed to death. In each case a personal item was taken from the scene. What makes Craven stand out is the fact that not only was his laptop taken but also data discs. It was Will Graham who first suggested Craven was the intended target and that the other killings were a smokescreen." Krendler's smile was a cold as his eyes. "If you would like to explain, Will?"

Flustered by the multiple pairs of eyes turned in his direction Will stumbled over his words. "Carl Craven lived alone and the other victims lived with Alphas. Craven's apartment had been ransacked so the killer took his time. It kinda suggested he was looking specifically for these discs. The trophies taken at the other crime scenes had been in plain sight. The other victims were similar in appearance. They had the same eye and hair colour and similar facial features. Craven was different."

"Good work, son." Krendler spoke to Will as if he were a child and in return received a *fuck you* glare from the Omega. Embarrassed by his own dismal performance, Will ducked his head when his nemesis continued talking . "There is no profile hypothesis. No DNA was left behind by the killer, no usable fingerprints and we have no motive. There are no suspects. My team and I looked at theses cases from a different angle by concentrating on the work Craven was carrying out prior to his death. The only topic on his news blog for several weeks concerned the joint committee set up twelve years ago between the United and Southern States to investigate Omega trafficking. If you would refer to your summaries."

Even though the sound of pages being turned filled the room, Jorgensen's contemptuous mumbles were clearly audible.

"Information supplied by Mary Ellen Morton, a social worker from Georgia led to the formation of the committee. Thanks to the work carried out by the committee, many of those involved in trafficking were arrested. However rumours have always persisted that the ringleaders behind these gangs were never apprehended. Craven suggested a group of high profile and influential people who were involved with trafficking applied pressure and succeeded in shutting down the committee before the work was complete. Furthermore, Craven insisted this group arranged for the elimination of people who were on the committee or had testified before it; people who knew the identities of those at the very top of the trafficking hierarchy."

"Have I got this straight?" Jorgensen called out. "Are you talking about a conspiracy theory?"

Ignoring the remark, Krendler carried on. "Out of a core group of twenty five people associated with the committee, eighteen have died since the investigation ended. Three more are missing. If you look at the summary, the list of the deceased include judges, doctors, high ranking church officials and Mary Ellen Morten."

Jorgensen was boiling and couldn't hold his tongue. "Some of these deceased, Barber, MacKenzie, Wright and Laurence, they were elderly when they sat on the committee. This list is a roll call of the ancients."

"If Craven was correct, this is organised assassination on a mass scale." Krendler said confidently

"Are you for real?" Jorgensen asked Krendler then turning to Will said. "Is he for real?"

Will observed Krendler's lips and brow doing dances of perturbation. "The order to investigate Craven's allegations comes from the top. We have a duty to show matters which concern Omegan society are taken seriously."

"Because the Omega Liberation Organisation and a few other pressure groups are saying these alleged murders are all part of some kind of grand conspiracy, we have to waste valuable time investigating." Jorgensen snarled.

The briefing room descended into a chaotic jumble of snipes as Jorgensen and Krendler took chunks out of each other. Will's eyes were transfixed on the wall-size board behind Krendler and rose to inspect it closer. The usually neat and tidy murder board had been transformed into a smorgasbord of photographs, dates and arrows. Eyelids growing heavy and the information in front of him swirling around, Will closed his eyes and imagined Craven standing next to him recounting his life story.

"Will? Will?" Jack's voice soothed him back to reality and a quietened room.

"It's in there, Jack, I can almost see it but there's too much information." Will gestured to the board.

"Can't see the wood for the trees." Jack said quietly.

"That's it, Jack. He promoted a conspiracy to hide the real investigation." Will almost shouted. "Carl Craven was a showman but not a risk taker. If he had uncovered multiple murder-for-hires he would have backed down.

"The facts show Craven was writing about the committee." Krendler spat out.

"Happy as I am to get your perspective, you heard the boy wonder so I suggest you shut up." Jorgensen smirked.

"Special Agent Jorgensen, this investigation is going ahead." Jack tried to harness his frustration.

"Jack, you've got to be kidding me." Jorgensen exclaimed.

"Special Agent Krendler and his team have spend a great deal of time detailing this case."

"Carl Craven was crazy." Jorgensen blustered. "He believed in government cover-ups. Believed big foot was real and that alligators were shimmying along the sewers in downtown New York. You name it, he'd materialise the evidence to prove it existed."

"Will?" Jack asked.

Under the spotlight, Will felt his heart began to thump faster. "It's too wayward for my taste, Jack."

"Wayward?" Jorgensen was out of his chair. "Is wayward Omegan slang for *it's a huge pile of horse shit, Jack*. I have cases, Jack, real cases to solve. I haven't got time to try and decipher a nut job's fucked up fantasy world."

For a moment Will was not sure if he was the nut job or Krendler, before finally settling on Craven.

"If it drew in the crowds, Craven would investigate it. Zombies, aliens... " Jorgensen was on a roll, snapping his fingers he called out. "Anyone?"

"Chupacabra." Beverly snapped back.

"Werewolves." A trainee ventured.

"Craven was also a capable investigative journalist." Krendler said in defence of his hypothesis. "He concentrated on the deaths he considered suspicious."

"Suspicious?" Jorgensen rumbled. "Is one of the suspicious deaths Judge Barber? He was eighty-one when he died. It would only have been suspicious if he'd been fucking immortal."

"Do you know what your problem is Jorgensen? You hate working with other agents." Krendler's voice cracked like a whip.

"I don't hate working with other agents, Krendler." Jorgensen laughed out a rebuttal. "It a small percentage I hate working with and you're in that percentage."

"That's enough." Jack boomed making Will jump.

Jorgensen took a deep breath and sat down. Will stood motionless, wide eyed, until he saw the slight nod of Crawford's head. Knowing it was his cue to return to his seat Will did not hesitate.

"Will, what's your take?" Jack's voice reflected his regained composure leaving Will wondering how Jack managed to flipside his emotions so easily.

"You hide a leaf in a forest, Jack. I can follow Craven's trail and cut out the deadwood." Will began to breathe in Crawford's calmness. "Much of this material is anecdotal. I'll access his blog and trawl through his archives. Jack, it will be quicker if I do this by myself and in my own way."

"Run with it. As long as you give it your best shot that's fine. If you come back empty handed then the case will be passed over to Special Agent Krendler and his team." Jack's voice took on a new note. "Until instructed otherwise any leads on the Craven case are to be given to Graham. Any problems, Will, you know where to find me. Remember people we keep our differences in-house. Any leaks and I will personally plug them. Do I make myself clear?"

After his secretary had walked into the briefing room at the end of the meeting and made the announcement, thoughts of arranging a time to discuss training found it's way to the bottom of Jack's list of things to do. The door to his office ajar, Jack watched it swing open as Will made his way through. Crawford made no attempt to remove the whisky bottle or the two empty glasses on his desk.

"Celebrating?" Will asked as he reached a chair and sat down, looking straight at the Alpha.

"Finding all three of those Omega girls alive warrants celebration. Jorge and I raised a glass to Lady Luck." Will had only known Jack to shorten his colleague's name on rare occasions. "The girls have been transferred to a medical facility. They say they're in good shape considering."

"It was more than luck, Jack. Others have read those witness statements and didn't see it. Paul Jorgensen is a damned good investigator."

Crawford's voice was wistful. "I sometimes wonder why I do this job, why any of us do this job. On a day like today, when lives are saved, I know why we do it."

The Alpha pointed to the bottle but Will declined the offer. "I thought you had left. It's six thirty. Way past your bedtime."

Will laughed at the remark, appreciating the humour. "Zeller is finishing up. Everyone got side tracked once they knew about the rescue. Heard you were here, realised we were supposed to discuss the training."

"Is Hannibal going to be okay with you getting home late?"

"I got Zeller to call him, take the blame." Will chuckled. "The deaths supposedly connected to trafficking, Jack, why are we investigating?"

"Politics." Jack shot back. "They're clearing away the cobwebs before the new broom is in the White House."

"The ones at the top are trying to impress the incomer by painting themselves Omega friendly." Will hesitated then said softly. "They say you didn't get to be director because you refused to play the game."

"You have to be a certain kind of person to reach the top, Will and I decided a long time ago I'm not that kind of person."

"Krendler is wrong. Whatever Craven was investigating, he didn't see it as a threat. It's not trafficking. His theory is so lame, if it was a horse, it would have to be put down."

"You want my professional opinion of Krendler's take on the case? It's bullshit." Jack shook his head slowly as he spoke. "Something doesn't smell right. That's why I'm glad you volunteered to take a look."

"I didn't volunteer, Jack. You were staring at me intensely, willing me to step forward. Thought you were gonna burn a hole in my skull."

It was Crawford's turn to chuckle. "What you bring to the table is what we need, Will."

"Didn't need empathy to work that out. The records of the committee are sealed. You'll need to cut the red tape to take a peek behind the drapes. You'll need someone close enough to the political hierarchy to make that happen, say someone married to the President's nephew."

Will held up a hand to stop Crawford from commenting. "I'm gonna need an expert to wade through the political swamp. Craven's work is in the public domain so confidentiality isn't a problem. I'm gonna ask Robert Lecter to lend a hand."

"Robert Lecter? Your father-in-law?"

"And the President's adviser. The White House is winding down and his skills are not often in demand. He misses the intrigue and he's kinda lost interest in his law firm."

Crawford sat silent while he tried to think of an argument to counter Will's proposal. "If it gets the job done, then good. Just don't put him in danger."

"Hell, Jack, he's so bored he tried to teach my son the rudiments of soccer. He ended up in the Emergency Room with a damaged knee cause he skidded on the lawn."

Jack took his time studying the boy before asking. "The Lecters? Are they treating you okay?"

"They're a great family, Jack." Will's smile was wider than Crawford had ever seen before. "They make me feel like I'm one of their own."

Will felt as if he was pulling a cart laden with rocks by the time he arrived home. As he entered the sitting room, he noticed Robert seated in his chair staring at the television screen.

Hannibal, relaxed in the leather recliner, had Willow in his lap; her head nestled against the Alpha's chest. Immediately she saw the Omega she sat upright and stretched out her arms towards him. Leaning forward, Will allowed her to wrap her arms around his neck then lifted her into a hug.

"She was worried and would not stay in bed." Hannibal explained and Will felt a tinge of guilt.

"Willow chose which programme we would watch." Robert waved his hand in the screen's direction. "May I introduce you to Mister Winnie the Pooh Bear."

"He's Winnie the Pooh, grandfather." Willow called out.

"Well, Winnie the Pooh Bear seems to be constantly in the thralls of an existential crisis. Probably due to the fact...." Robert lifted one eyebrow knowingly. "He doesn't wear any pants."

"Grandfather, his name is Winnie the Pooh." Willow giggled.

"That as well." Robert responded. Will admired the way in which his father-in-law gently teased Willow into talking.

"Time for your bed, Button, then Papa has to eat." Will said smiling at his daughter. With her lips to the Omega's ear, Willow whispered her important news.

"Willow said you made me soup?" Will glanced at his Alpha with a look of surprise on his face.

"Silkie chicken in a broth." Hannibal replied as he raised his head to look at the Omega. "You deserve the best."

Relieved at being back home after consuming the rollercoaster emotions of the day, Will lowered his guard and tears began to well in his eyes. With his free hand Will gently stroked the side of his Alpha's face and mouthed *"I love you."*

Chapter 6

There was a momentary feeling of loss as the Omega left the bed. Hannibal had heard the infant cry, felt the boy beside him immediately respond and although not fully awake, the part of Hannibal's brain driven to guard was ever vigilant. Will soon returned and snuggled up to his husband and was rewarded by a growl from deep within his Alpha's chest. A sound so primordial, the Omega became boneless in the Alpha's arms, falling back into a sound sleep with the knowledge he was safe.

At the first buzz of the alarm, Hannibal was up and into the shower. Later, dressed only in his boxer briefs, Hannibal began his day with twenty press-ups on the bedroom floor. With the Omega still not stirring, the Alpha yanked back the sheets exposing the smaller form and smoothed his hand down the Omega's thigh. Will stopped his pretence of sleeping and opened his stormy blue grey eyes.

"Up." Hannibal said

"Thought the worker might be allowed to sleep in."

"Part time worker." Hannibal watched the boy lazily rise then stretch before heading into the bathroom.

As the boy's rear end disappeared from sight, Hannibal mused how ten years ago, the mere suggestion he should marry an Omega would be dismissed outright. Now all his long-term visions automatically included Will by his side and the thought of any other than the Omega as his mate was derisible.

Not that their relationship wasn't without difficulties. Hannibal's unfailing logic told him they walked a thin line with Will slowly asserting his independence which Hannibal wouldn't want any other way. Hannibal had allowed the Omega to glimpse his vulnerable side and in return, the boy shared his darker experiences which left the Alpha seething, wishing he could put his hands around the necks of those responsible and slowly extinguish all signs of life.

Hannibal knew outsiders viewed Will as calm, loyal and modest, the perfect mate. Those closer would include intelligent and loving as his most positive traits. Hannibal would agree the boy had all the good qualities people attested to, but underneath it all, Will Graham was a conundrum. Robert had once remarked that Will sailed his happy go lucky nature across vast oceans of deep water but over the years, only Hannibal truly understood how deep and murky those waters were. Hannibal was keenly aware how easy it was for Will to sink down to another level, deeper and deeper, until nothing anyone could say would bring him back to the surface. The Alpha often witnessed the painfully unsure boy hiding his insecurities. How an innocent comment could bring forth the tears or more surprisingly, an angry outburst.

Hannibal had hoped to change the Omega by coaxing him out of his shell but the Alpha acknowledged he was also changing. The children had extracted emotions he never knew he possessed, far beyond the normal Alphan instinct to protect his brood. He relished the time he spent with these little individuals who had the power to both make his heart

melt with their smiles or keep him awake until the early hours through concern when they were sick. Hannibal enjoyed his life, enjoyed the time he spent with his children, embraced totally the whole concept of family.

Will stepped back into the school day routine. Finishing his breakfast before the others around the table, he woke, washed and dressed the children. He never varied from his timetable and brooked no nonsense if one of the troops began to whine. Ushering them downstairs to the dining room where Mrs Foster had placed their breakfast, Will stayed to supervise. Once finished he instructed them to fetch their bags and followed them into the hallway.

"Hurry, Andrius." Hannibal called up the staircase. Having waited for several minutes for the boy to return with his backpack, Hannibal had no doubt a toy or a book had distracted his son from his task. Will moved forward to give his Alpha a goodbye peck on the cheek and felt an arm snake around his waist. The Alpha's lips did not miss their mark, warm and moist, Will held fast not wanting the moment to end. Hannibal slowly pulled back then Will felt the familiar tingle of his skin as soft brown eyes scanned his features memorising every inch. They had both agreed to take things slowly until confident their differences were in the past. The arrangement reminded Will of their first few weeks of married life.

"I thought we were taking things slow?" Will smiled.

"When you arrive home from work you are too tired to talk. I have missed your company .... " Hannibal's thumb brushed against the Omega's lips. "... and missed tasting you."

Will took some time out while Robert *"prepared* " his study for their joint operation. With the temperature moderate, he dressed Tomas appropriately and walked around the garden carrying the baby in his arms rather than the sling. Dipping down occasionally, he allowed his son a closer inspection of a flower or pointed upwards expressing enthusiasm as a flock of birds flew over. Later Will grabbed the opportunity to head for the pool after settling the infant under the watchful eye of his grandfather. His exercise regime since the birth of Tomas had been erratic, having the wall of silence between him and his mate meant he couldn't freely request help from the Alpha. Taking a slow and steady approach and opting for swimming, crunches and yoga, the Omega felt physically and mentally empowered as his body toned. Will was not without vanity and from time to time took stock of his naked form in the bathroom mirror hoping the improvements which pleased him would please his mate. Sometimes it troubled him when he fretted whether he was still attractive to the Alpha. Hannibal had never made any disparaging remarks about the Omega's physique before or after pregnancy and if Will was truthful, during their sexual interactions, the Alpha appeared more fulfilled by giving rather than receiving pleasure.

In contrast to Hannibal's light and airy home office, Robert's study was a time capsule for the early 1900s. His oak desk with its brass fittings, the rich wood bookcases and leather chairs were in pristine condition. To a novice the furniture could be mistaken for reproductions but Will knew Robert cherished his antiques and lavished them with care. The desktop computer

and large monitor was jarringly present century as were the many electronic gadgets dotted around the room. The Alpha's style primarily may have been old fashioned but his inquisitive nature was addicted to modern technology. Will carefully placed his laptop on the desk and pulled up a chair.

"William, I hope you do not mind but after you spoke to me last night, I perused the list of names you gave me. It prompted me to access the press releases given by the White House for the period of time the Committee was in operation. Government transparency was in vogue and details of persons assigned to the committee were made public."

Robert passed the blue folder on his left to the Omega. "Margaret Theodore was one of those listed as missing by Carl Craven. She temporarily transferred from the Treasury Department and acted as secretary to the chair of the Committee. Once her work was done, Mrs Theodore took early retirement and remarried. She is now living in the Seychelles. I communicated with her via Facebook. Not only is she alive, she knew the whereabouts of another of the so-called missing. Patricia Adair moved to Florida five years ago and is the proprietor of a community residential home."

"You have Facebook?"

"You seemed surprised? I have learned to swing with the times. It helps when you are working with those younger. They seem somewhat bewildered when this old fogey can do more than send an email."

Will opened the folder and studied the picture of a grey haired woman in her sixties. Standing on a beach, a Lhasa apso in her arms, she looked tanned and healthy. Her relaxed smile suited her surroundings.

"Her dog's name is Muffin." Robert commented.

"Yeah." Will murmured. "I'll be sure to put that in my report to Crawford."

"You are not reacting quite how I anticipated." Robert said with a hint of disappointment. "You sound discontent."

"How did you find out Theodore had retired?"

"She had worked for the Treasury Department for thirty years and was given a long service award. A dinner was held at the White House as a thank you for those who received this award. The Federal Civil Service website reported the facts and mentioned her relocating to the Seychelles. The rest wasn't difficult."

"Jorgensen threw out some names at the meeting. Said their deaths were from natural causes. I checked and he was right." Will slowly exhaled. "Finding the answers is proving to be easy."

"Perhaps too easy?"

"Why didn't Krendler check the facts before presenting his case?" Will looked at Theodore's image.

"Occam's broom. He may have intentionally ignored the facts which refuted his case."

"He's ambitious. If the evidence supports Craven's theory of murder for hire then Krendler could be given his own task force."

"A classic case of misdirection." Robert stated.

Will tapped the folder on the desk as his mind searched for the missing pieces. "We're chasing our tails looking in the past We're not trying to solve Craven's murder."

"There are people who believe conspiracy theories have been invented by governments in order to hide the real conspiracies."

Krendler's expression as Jack made his announcement flashed into the Omega's head. "He thought he would be in charge of the investigation. Didn't expect I would be thrown into the mix and be given the case."

"Let's hope for your sake, William, he is a good loser. I often find when people hold grudges things can turn ugly."

Will waited patiently under the sheets as Hannibal finished in the bathroom. The Alpha's voice was melodic, pitched higher than when speaking and Will sighed dreamily as he listened to his mate sing the Lithuanian folk song. On rare occasions when Hannibal was high on passion, he had playfully tried to woo the Omega into bed by serenading him. Will could never master Lithuanian despite Hannibal's best efforts, an odd word of phrase may stick but unless constantly in use, the majority of the tutoring was soon forgotten. The words may have been foreign when Hannibal sang but Will was swept away by the wave of emotion flowing from the Alpha expressed in the tone of his voice or the look in his eyes. Sauntering into the bedroom au naturel, Hannibal stood by the dresser searching for fresh pyjama pants. Will, with his eyes half closed, peered through his long lashes at the sculptured body and athletic thighs. Even when idling, the man's manhood was magnificent, brimming with potency. Will wished he could overcome his prudish nature, roll out of bed, kneel before the Alpha and tease it sinfully with his tongue.

"I can feel you staring at it, Will." Hannibal didn't try to hide the amusement in his voice."

Will groaned with embarrassment and turned his back on the Alpha, covering his head with the sheet. He could hear the sound of movement, feel the bed depress, feel the heat from the Alpha's body.

"I believe it is about time we spent the night at Chandler Square."

The Omega turned to face the Alpha. "The way I'm feeling, we need a week."

Hannibal gripped the boy's chin. The kiss seemed to last forever, Hannibal's tongue exploring delicately as if it was the boy's first time.

"Are you seducing me, Alpha?" Will nuzzled Hannibal's neck.

First there was a splutter, then a wail before the crying became real. Will groaned *"Geez, thanks buddy."* as he scrambled out of bed knowing the romantic mood had disintegrated.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Robert suggested they take a day's break from investigating Will had been in agreement. The newspaper archives had been a treasure trove of information but the font was not easy on their eyes. Fresh from their mini hiatus, sitting in Robert's study, they resumed their work.

"Mary Ellen Morten's death is the foundation for Craven's conspiracy theory." Will began.

"If we erode the foundation then the whole theory will implode." The solemn edge to Robert's voice made Will smile.

"Mary Ellen Morten was a social worker from Atlanta, Georgia." Will placed a blue folder between them. "The local police picked up an underage Omega girl working the streets. Morten was called to be her advocate. The girl had been adopted by what family services described as a good family. Morten discovered the girl had been given up by her adopted family and re-adopted by another couple. It was then legal in certain states for adoptees to be moved on without going through the court system. The story the girl told Mary Ellen prompted her to start investigating. She found many young Omegas who were in the system were working the streets or in brothels. Over the next few years she built an information network in conjunction with other like-minded people. They uncovered widespread trafficking not just in the southern states but in the northern states as well."

"She was a very determined and brave woman." Robert remarked.

"Morten had all this information but didn't trust anyone in the south. So she travelled north and spoke to Evan Whittaker, the Senator for Ohio. The first question is why Whittaker?" Will asked.

"The Whittaker, the Tier and the Sutcliffe families have always championed Omegan rights. Evan Whittaker's record is exemplary and he is an honourable man."

"Whittaker gathers his own team, looks at her evidence and validates it. He approaches the President then suddenly there is an explosion of self righteousness all over the country."

"The governments both north and south were in a difficult position, William. You cannot condemn another country over their abuse of civil rights when your own is deeply flawed."

"Okay, the committee is formed. Morten gives her evidence. Two months later, she is dead. Let's look at the facts." Will glanced down at his notes. "Mary Ellen Morten was on vacation in Florida visiting old friends. Her car crashes and she dies. The first officers on the scene record the events as an accident. They find a half-empty bottle of vodka stashed in her bag. The medical examiner rules Morten was driving under the influence based on the amount of alcohol in her system. Her family protests."

"They claimed she seldom drank."

"So they hire a private detective who weeks into the case mysteriously disappears. Then Whittaker gets involved. He asks a friend, a retired thirty-year veteran with the Denver police department to investigate. He does but when he returns home he is shot to death in his driveway. His murder has never been solved."

"Didn't Mr Craven also suggest the patrol officers who discovered the wreckage were also victims?" Robert reminded Will.

"Yeah. One died six months later and the other apparently vanished off the face of the earth."

"We have all the facts. How do we go about separating them from the fairy stories?"

"I've asked Zeller to request the medical examiner's records on the cop from Denver. Jack said he can pull the police report. One of the advantages of being FBI, there's no jurisdictional problems in the north." Will pawed over the pages of the folder until he reached the image of a man dressed in uniform with an open-mouthed smile on his round face. "This is Patrol Officer Mark Collins. He's the one who died."

Robert adjusted his glasses. "He does look rather well nourished."

"Yeah, very well nourished. Florida is a southern state so we can't access any official records."

"I can." Robert said defiantly. "Part of my work involves tracing descendants of land owners. We have agents worldwide including the southern states. The death of Officer Collins would have been registered. I'll instruct one of my people to obtain his death certificate."

"Just like that." Will beamed.

"You seemed very determined to get to the bottom of this mystery."

"It's Krendler. He kinda trashed me at our first meeting." Will knew he sounded bitter. "Guess I want to pay him back."

"Well, in that case I think we should cut to the chase as they say. I'll will call in some favours from acquaintances and attempt to arrange a meeting with Evan Whittaker."

"You can do that?"

"Of course, William." Robert chuckled. "Why else do you think Jack Crawford would have allowed me to be involved?"

Will stretched out on the couch deliberating whether taking an aspirin would banish the muzzy ache behind his brow. The murmuring of voices from the hallway was soothing until the stomping of small feet on the stairs jarred him back into reality.

Hannibal's face was tight when he walked into the sitting room and squatted down next to the Omega. Will adored how the Alpha made a mundane movement look graceful.

"Trouble in paradise?" Will tilted his head towards the Alpha.

"I promised Andrius I would take him to the tennis club the next time I played. I have arranged a game with Chavez tomorrow. The girls have announced they wish to accompany us."

"Let me guess, you've been trying to explain why they can't go with you."

"They have promised they would be good but we both know how quickly they can become distracted."

"I get it, Han." Will pushed himself up. "The girls will get bored. How about if I tag along. We can take Tomas; show off the latest fruit of your loins."

"You hate the club."

"I'm willing to sacrifice myself on this occasion." Will sighed dramatically. "Isn't that what you're angling for? Guilt tripping me with your soulful brown eyes."

"Am I that obvious?"

"I could do with a break. Been looking at death since this morning." Will yawned. "Maybe working from home isn't such a great idea. The lines between home and the Bureau are becoming blurred."

"You have earned a reward." Hannibal leaned in for a kiss.

"You don't deserve these lips." Will playfully turned his head away. "I'll settle for a neck massage instead."

The Gwynns Falls tennis club was one of the finest in Maryland and for many years had maintained the exclusivity of its membership by its invite-only policy. In need of fresh blood to secure its financial future, there had been a significant sea change to the way the club functioned. Diversity had gradually been introduced, crèche facilities and child minders were provided to attract families and an additional restaurant where children would be

welcome had been opened. The numbers had swelled but there was still an air to the place that failed to appeal to Omegas, ensuring that particular dynamic remained in the minority. Will had never been fond of the club although the greeting he had received was amiable. Hannibal had suggested it was Will's own prejudice against those at Gwynns Falls who broadcasted their wealth which had made the Omega find excuses to stay away.

Although Hannibal shied away from reacting badly when the kids were messy during an outing, this did not apply when they were sitting in his precious Bentley. Will sighed with relief when the Alpha had elected to use the Volvo. The chirping of his children, the scent of his Alpha and the sunshine warming his face compelled Will to close his mind to any thoughts other than to enjoy his time with his family.

Hannibal steered the car into the parking area where they disembarked and made their way to where Hannibal's opponent was waiting. The girls skipped ahead hand in hand as Andrius marched alongside his father trying to match his stride. Pushing the stroller several paces behind, Will had ensured the silver collar draped around his throat was displayed. Although not obligatory, occasionally Will felt it prudent to advertise the ring of metal which symbolised ownership. With unbonded Alphas fuelled by testosterone swaggering around the tennis courts, Will did not need any misunderstandings to ruin their day.

Chavez was one of Hannibal's closest friends and his favoured tennis partner. Handsome, wealthy and outrageously flirty, wherever Chavez went so did a trio of young Omega beauties who Will had dubbed *the harem* . Will glanced as the women parked their petite derrieres on the wooden benches while he made the children comfortable around the picnic table. The women were beautiful, with smoothed tanned skin and long shiny hair, each had dressed their curvaceous body in a fashionable low cut dress. Although pleasant enough, Will doubted he had anything in common with them and conversations centred on his children had a short life span. He couldn't imagine any of them ever having their flat little tummy bulging with a baby.

Preferring to follow Hannibal and Chavez in their friendly rivalry, Will only spared a quick glance at the woman standing to the right of the court. Dressed in black, her hands deep inside her jacket pockets, her preternatural stillness made her stand out from the throng. Will's stomach churned as he realised he had stepped back into his FBI mode and tried to shake it off by fixing his attention back on the game. The determination of both Alphas to perform to the best of their ability was complimented by their own brand of humour. Chavez proved to be the master of lucky shots and fluke returns. Often Hannibal strolled around the court, looking skyward with arms outstretched, imploring the gods of fair play to give him a break. Never elevated above two friends having a good time, it was not important to either of them who won the game. When Chavez was triumphant, snatching victory with an impressive lob, Hannibal lowered his racket and joined in the applause.

Will was grateful when the harem helped with ferrying the children to the restaurant while the two Alphas showered and changed. Seated on the terrace, Will was proud his brood were behaving. Even when presented with their ice creams rather than whoop with delight, they politely uttered their thanks. He knew it was Hannibal's presence that kept them in check, knew they would not want to disappoint the Alpha. It was not out of fear, it was

for seeing the smile on their father's face, wide and warm, knowing later there would be rough and tumble play as a reward for being good.

Will sat stunned as one of the Omegas, tired of competing with the others for Chavez, turned her attention to Hannibal. She swished her tail over to the bar and perched on a stool waiting to be served. She smiled at Hannibal, crossing her long bare legs as if daring him to take a closer inspection. Will shot her a warning look but returning to the table with her cocktail, she licked her glossy lips and leaned forward revealing more of her voluptuous cleavage. Will verged on anger, trying to think of a way to ward off her advances on his Alpha other than hand to hand combat. Casually reaching over the table Hannibal took Will's hand in his and through hooded eyes gave his Omega a look that was guaranteed to send a shiver of delight down anyone's spine. Raising Will's hand, Hannibal brought it to his mouth and caressed it with his lips. Will, eyes sharp as daggers, glared at his rival and mouthed *"Mine."* Defeated the woman gave a small shrug and realigned her focus back to Chavez.

"You were jealous." Hannibal said as he folded the stroller and placed it in the cargo area.

"No I wasn't." Will protested now sorry for acting huffy as they had walked back to the car.

"I could smell it on you." Hannibal stated as he closed the trunk.

"She was throwing herself at you." Will hissed. "What did you expect?"

"They may throw themselves at me, Will, but I am not obliged to catch them." Hannibal grabbed the Omega's arm and the atmosphere changed. "When are you going to believe that I love you, Will?"

Caught off guard Will flustered. "I'm sorry. We both know it's me, not you. I was just scared she might be your type."

"I have only one type, Will and that is you." Hannibal stared straight into the Omega's eyes. "You, only you, always."

As the emotion hit him, shame welled up inside of the Omega. "I'm sorry for doubting you. It's just she was all over you."

"Ignore them, Will. I do." The Alpha said as he released his grip. "Learn to build defence strategies."

"Would punching her on the nose count as one?"

The tension broke and Hannibal laughed, a loud genuine laugh. He brushed the Omega's curls with his fingertips. Slowly moving apart, they made their way to their respective sides of the car. Will sensed they were being watched and raising his hand to shield his eyes from the sun, he scanned the horizon. He could barely make out the figure standing in the shade of the tree. Turned in their direction it stood stock still, observing. Will slid into the Volvo and

waited for the engine to purr into life. When the vehicle began to move, he thought of his safe, secure home and never leaving again, not even to go to Quantico. He mentally cursed knowing he had only one more day with his family before he had to return.

Walking into Jack's office, Will could see the thunder clouds gathering above Crawford's head.

"What's wrong?" Will asked.

"Krendler's having his fun. He sequestered three agents from VCAC."

"Why?"

"He's following the trafficking angle. They received the first batch of transcripts from the hearings. They are trudging their way through them as I speak. I've just been instructed to give them my full support."

"It's not trafficking, Jack. He's wasting time."

"He's creating an army of disciples. Playing at God."

Will took the Craven folder and handed it to the Alpha. "Six of the mysterious deaths have been debunked. The three missing in action? Two are alive and kicking. This time next week hopefully I'll be finished."

Crawford sounded his appreciation. "Nice work."

"More Robert Lecter than me. His law firm specialises in land rights. It often involves deciphering old wills and leases then following a trail of descendants."

"Sounds like detective work."

"Yeah. He's good at it." He watched as Crawford read the summary under the picture of Margaret Theodore. "Her dog is called Muffin."

Jack's laughter put the Omega at ease. "He's damned good. He should have tried his hand at law enforcement."

Will pushed the second folder across the desk to the Alpha. "Monroe. The forensics came back. There is a match to Richard White also known as the Tri State killer. His kill zone would be restricted to one district, victims would live or work a few blocks apart. Three victims within one month then he would move onto another state. He would lie fallow for half a year before striking again. Known to have killed in Iowa, Wisconsin and Indiana. He died in a shoot out with patrol officers in Nebraska. Time wise Monroe was in the middle of

his killing spree. My guess is there are another two victims from Chicago not yet linked to him."

"Have you told the others?"

"Jorgensen is reviewing all the case files with the trainees. Catherine Monroe was murdered on March fifteen last year. Jorgensen said he has one around the time that is a possible. White had no preference for the dynamics. Alpha, Beta, Omega, the victims could be from any of those groups as long as they were young and pretty. It's likely Chicago has an Alpha or Beta cold case sitting on a shelf waiting to be matched."

"You've gone as far as you can, Will." Crawford's eyes sparkled with pride. "I'll contact Chicago and liaise with Jorgensen. What's next?"

"Jerome. I have an idea how to progress but I'll need help."

"We have a briefing at eleven. Outline your case. Get input from the other team members. Experience counts in this line of work. Jorgensen and Beverly have plenty. You'd be surprised how many killers get their inspiration from reading about the crazies we have put behind bars."

"Jack, nothing would surprise me."

"Before you leave. One of the VCAC agents wants to see how we work. I've assigned him to you for a few days."

"Jack, I work alone, you know that." Will protested.

"If you think you're calling the shots, Will, let me disabuse you. I take orders from above and you take orders from me. That's the way it is." Jack raised an eyebrow waiting for the Omega to respond.

Although the words weren't said harshly, Will had observed Crawford's fingers curl into his palms as he spoke and knew it was wise to back down. "Guess a couple of days won't hurt me."

"Saul Katz is good at his job. I've worked with him before. He's a decorated marine, Will, someone who has served his country. Since he joined the FBI he has received countless commendations." Trying to show he was happy to comply Will forced a smile.

Hannibal had not intended to drive to his Baltimore office that morning. He trusted his employees and normally in his absence, they ran his company like a well-oiled machine. Nevertheless, they had been presented with the unexpected and his attendance was urgently needed. With Bedelia obliged to attend the Omegan clinic due to an emergency and having agreed to the meeting, Hannibal had no choice other than to take his youngest son with him. When inspectors from the Building Code department had expressed concerns regarding

a construction company in which Hannibal had invested, he was aware talking to them face to face would be the only way to quell their anxiety.

Rumours of substandard materials being used in the construction industry were often hinted at after the bids for contracts were won or lost. Hannibal's emphatic denial he was not involved in any schemes, let alone one which revolved around the building of a local school, was accepted. Seeing the small infant cradled in the Alpha's strong arms had sent a powerful message and the visitors left reassured the care of the young was of paramount importance to this Alpha.

Ardelia went through the call log as Hannibal secured Tomas in his carrier and prepared to leave.

"Turner's been in touch twice, wanting to discuss contextual architecture for his house. I had no idea what he was talking about and neither had he, so I said you would call back tomorrow. Larry Joseph is in town next month and wants to set up a meeting to discuss the revitalization of the Glendale site. Allen from the New York Times called. Said the interview is going to focus on the relationship between architecture and other art forms. In particular have you undergone any aesthetic experiences which later inspired you to create?"

"Arrange the meeting with Joseph and tell Allen I am fine with the format of the interview. I will deal with Turner."

"Don't forget you have been invited to the Gala fundraiser dinner. I need to confirm your attendance. Considering our chat about your image, you need a partner for the evening. Perhaps a young, handsome Omega?"

"Will finds those types of functions intimidating." Hannibal replied.

"Well, take somebody else. Your mother or your father. Hell, take me. You can't afford to be photographed surrounded by hussies. On second thoughts don't take me. People might believe I'm sleeping with my boss. Don't want them thinking I'm desperate."

"Perish the thought. I would not wish to sully your reputation." Hannibal said smiling as he grabbed the handle of the carrier.

Ardelia switched back into her professional mode. "The computer analyst couldn't find any viruses but said account activity showed someone was accessing your emails. Said you should get all your phones and iPads checked out. As the intruder was interested in your private life not your work, maybe one of your fans has gone to the next level."

The slamming of the file drawer startled Will back to reality. He closed the folder and pushed it to the far side of his desk. "Hey don't take it out on me."

"Sorry, kiddo, but you don't know my cousin. He walks around with a stick rammed up his butt." Beverly snarled and flopped back into her chair. "He's a younger version of Crawford. Likes to remind us to observe the rules."

"It's only for a while and then it's back to you and me. I can't concentrate with you acting out. I need to get my mind straight before the briefing. I don't want Krendler making a fool out of me again."

"Jack and Saul are ex military and talk the same language." Will heard the Beta give another snarl. "Shame the rest of us don't understand it."

"Beverly." The voice came from behind Will and as he turned to see its owner, Beverly answered in the same stark tone.

"Saul."

Switching his view between agents, Will could see they shared the same heritage and the same grim expression. The man turned his head in Will's direction.

"I'm Saul Katz. VCAC. Where can I sit?"

"Allow me." Beverly was up and grabbed the chair from the corner in seconds. Dragging it across the room she positioned it by the end of Will's desk. Before Will had time to issue a warning, the man had taken his seat and was leaning to one side.

"The legs are uneven." The man said in an accusatorially tone.

"Beggars can't be choosers." Beverly huffed as she strode to her desk.

"Sorry." Will said sheepishly. "Should have warned you. I was a late addition to the team so they grabbed the furniture from wherever."

"You should make a complaint. Health and safety." Saul's voice had the range of an automaton.

"We don't usually have visitors. Just don't lean on the desk. It'll probably collapse." Will said apologetically.

"This is a safety issue. Administration has a responsibility to ensure the workplace is a safe environment. You have a duty to report it."

Will didn't have to look. He could feel Beverly smirking behind his back.

Chapter End Notes

VCAC - Violent Crimes Against Children.

Chapter 8

Saul familiarised himself with the office and adhering to the Omega's warning, he avoided applying pressure to the table. The table itself had seen better days and he wondered whether it had been acquisitioned deliberately to show disrespect towards the newcomer.

"Okay. You want to see how I work. Two cases. You choose which one you want to investigate." Will placed the manila folders side by side. "Which do you prefer? Roasted or decap?"

Saul had grown used to gallows humour from fellow agents but was surprised to hear an Omega use it.

Saul could see the flush creeping across the Omega's face as he apologised. "I'm sorry. Bev and I use humour to deflect. One case is arson the other decapitation."

Saul had frequently gone undercover to infiltrate dangerous trafficking rings. His ability to play a part to perfection had ensured he had never been exposed as an agent. Yet here in the office a micro expression had revealed his true feelings. Saul's slip was the equivalent to a slap across his face by his own hand. The Omega's personnel file suggested he closed down when confronted by disapproval and Saul had made a mistake. He needed the Omega to lower his defences not reinforce the barricades. Saul immediately evaluated the current situation and opted for the relaxed approach.

"That's okay. I'll take roasted."

Will picked up the folder and placed it directly in front of the agent. "Ten minutes then I want to know what you see."

As Will pushed back his chair and rose, Saul mimicked the action. Will shook his head. "Hey, I'm going to take a leak. Don't need a helping hand."

Saul could hear Beverly's chuckling as he returned to the file. Names, places installed in his head he turned to the medical examiner's report.

"Will does it in five."

"Does what in five?" Saul asked.

"Looking at the file and seeing the answer." The taunt in his cousin's voice was obvious.

Saul had turned the page to the report from the fire department when Beverly spoke again. "Why are you here, Saul?"

"My boss wanted to see how Graham works."

"Why?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"Didn't you ask?" Beverly persisted.

"No."

"Got any idea why he's interested?"

"No."

"Didn't hazard a guess?"

"Are you trying to distract me, Beverly?"

"No, I'm trying to protect Will. This isn't the casual getting to know your neighbours kind of interdepartmental visit. You don't do casual."

"My boss was hoping some of the Omegan peace and love way of thinking will rub off on me." Saul's sardonic smile was hidden from his cousin.

"Wow." Beverly exclaimed. "Didn't know he believed in miracles."

Saul's ten minutes was nearly up when the Omega returned to the office. The remaining sixty six seconds allowed Saul time to assess Will Graham. Smartly dressed in black pants, dark blue shirt and jacket, they had come with an expensive price tag. The shirt was buttoned to the top and the tie fitted snugly around the Omega's neck. Underneath Saul was certain Graham wore a collar. Dark brown curly hair and flawless complexion, his bluish grey eyes were framed by glasses which the Omega periodically pushed back onto the bridge of his nose. The young man was slender and not much taller than five nine, the average for a male Omega. The scent was disguised under the masker but there was a hint of cologne, one that had been manufactured primarily for the Alpha market. Saul surmised it probably belonged to Graham's mate and the Omega had used it as a subtle warning to ward off unwanted attention. The typical Omegan shy demeanour and reluctance to maintain eye contact gave Graham an air of vulnerability and was designed to bring out the protective instinct in Alphas. Saul wondered whether Graham would cope with the undercurrent of hostility aimed at the Omega from certain quarters.

"What do you see?" Will asked.

Saul closed the file with the same solemnity a preacher would close his bible. "House fire. Two dead. Husband and wife both in their eighties. Deaths due to smoke inhalation. No evidence of accelerants. Cause of fire is undetermined. The morning after the fire the grandson made inquiries about life insurance held on the couple. Whenever he was interviewed his behaviour is described as evasive and erratic. The detectives consider him a person of interest."

"What don't you see?"

"Any evidence to support the theory the grandson is culpable."

"The insurance was a nickel and dime policy, enough to cover the dollar cost of the funeral. The house was a rental. There are zero motives on the financial side. The grandson was on the spectrum but the cops decided it didn't account for his behaviour. There was a shortage of fire investigators due to budget cuts. The report on file comes from the incident commander at the scene and the detectives ignored it. The cops became so addicted to the notion the grandson was guilty they put him under pressure." Will held up his hand with the thumb and forefinger practically touching. "That's how close the grandson came to confessing. If his family hadn't gotten him an advocate, he might be in jail."

"Working the same case for months, the investigators can lose their objectivity. A fresh prospective can open up the case."

"That's all I am. A fresh pair of eyes. I look at the evidence and the evidence explains. I juggle the facts inside my head and see the scene from everyone's prospective. Those detectives got tunnel vision; let their obsession run their investigation. They were arrogant, had to be proved right so they tried to jack up the law and slide underneath it." Will sigh was heavy. "It was winter. The couple were elderly. They probably ran their space heaters twenty four seven. If you look at the statistics of how many fires are caused through faulty equipment...."

Saul made a mental note that throughout his summary, Will had maintained eye contact. "What's the next stage?"

"I'll ask Crawford to contact the Fire Investigation Unit and get their opinion. It's best if the approach comes from the head of the BAU rather than a temporary consultant." Will took the folder back from Saul and placed it to one side. "In the meantime I'm gonna get my head straight for this meeting."

Hannibal heard the tapping of the cane on the wooden floors. Not wanting his father to waste his energy scouring the house he called out. "I am in my office, father."

By the time Robert had swung open the door, Hannibal had finished his report. "You are back early?"

"I am sorry to say we will be entertaining guests on Saturday and I have to arrange the catering. Donald has asked me to host a meeting with the Tiers and their advisers." Robert explained.

"Is Uncle Donald unwell?"

"No, on the contrary. He has second thoughts about holding the meeting at Sutcliffe house. As the party's convention is near, he does not want to appear to endorse James Hayden Tier."

"I understood that Hayden Tier and Uncle Donald had become quite close?" Hannibal queried.

"They have grown closer. However, doubts have been raised over those who are financing Hayden's campaign. It has been suggested they are not supportive of the Omegan Rights Bill and will expect Hayden to water it down should he be elected to office. My role is to persuade Hayden to make a public statement putting distance between him and any contentious issues his backers seem to favour. Then should he become the next President, he can hardly change his position without making himself to be a liar."

"For you to exert pressure on him suggests the doubts are serious."

"The party has to saddle the right horse before a candidate for the presidency is nominated. If Tier's backers are exerting influence the party needs to be informed ."

Hannibal studied his father. He looked aged, a man winding down "Was it you who nudged Uncle Donald into changing venues?"

"Donald has always strived for honesty and integrity even in politics. That is the legacy he leaves the country. The closer people get to power the more the press strips their private life down to the skeleton. In normal circumstances the reputation of the Tier family would not buckle under scrutiny. However, since James Hayden Tier stood for selection, I have found myself trusting the Tiers less and less. I feel Donald would benefit by not standing too near to them."

"You are not aggrieved that your services will no longer be required?"

"Oh, Hannibal, this isn't petty jealousy. Once Donald entered his final year in office, it was obvious any Presidential contenders would want to choose their own advisers. However, I will admit my loyalty being brought in question due to my nationality did sting. As for it being inferred I am too old and out of touch that was unpleasant. I have devoted a vast amount of my time to defending this country and have never asked to be bestowed with honours. The victors may write the history but as any historian will tell you eventually, the truth does come out. I have no doubt the small part I have played during Donald's presidency will one day be acknowledged. That is my reward."

"Do you feel I disrespected you, father? I changed the children's routine and in effect took away your role without discussing it with you or mother?"

"Admittedly at first I was a little put out but I understood your reasons. No, I am at a crossroads in my life. Too young to be put out to pasture, yet too old to try to impress with my soccer skills." Robert lightly tapped his knee with the cane. "At the moment I am enjoying playing at detective with William. Who knows maybe it is the start of a new career. Robert Lecter, private investigator."

"It's like being stalked by one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse." Beverly had loudly remarked as she and Will fast walked to the meeting with Saul treading briskly at their heels.

The briefing had Jack's mark all over it. The seating had been re-arranged, less auditorium style and more elementary school. The addition of tables meant they no longer had to balance the case files on their knees. Beverly made for the left side of the room where Zeller was already sitting, banishing Saul to Krendler's group. Jorgensen and Krendler were already tearing into each other. It was scrappy and non-productive with each trying to drown the other out.

"That's enough." Jack yelled and everything stilled. Will studied Crawford, absorbed his essence. Jack had the power of silence, could use it to emphasise his point of view or even to reprimand. He had a cold intelligence and concentration that made him a formidable interrogator. His dedication to his job was absolute. The only wall decorations in his office were photographs of the Ripper kills.

Will risked a glance and saw Krendler scowling, saw Jorgensen pushing back his hair exposing his receding hairline. On the far right, Will glimpsed the figure walking smoothly before it dropped into a chair. He nudged Beverly and whispered.

"What's Bowman doing here?"

"Jack brought in Doctor Beau as your temporary guardian angel." She smiled slyly.

"Doctor Beau?" Will asked.

"Yeah, that's what the ladies call Lloyd Bowman."

"Aw, Bev." Will quipped. "You're fangirling."

"What red blooded gal wouldn't? He's a real ladies man." Katz grinned. "Guess that means you're safe from his warm, masculine hands."

Unexpectedly a blush hit his cheeks and Will ducked his head pretending to look at his notes to hide his embarrassment. The format of the briefing hadn't changed as Crawford began to speak. Jack outlined their progress and asked Krendler for a tally.

"Twenty seven cases have been processed, Jack." Krendler replied.

"Thanks to the skill of my trainees another four are awaiting your seal of approval, Jack." Jorgensen added.

As Jack gave a single fatherly nod of appreciation at the trainees, he called out to the Omega. "Will. The Jerome Case."

Will had once attempted to explain to Zeller how his mind operated. How he could absorb a person's emotions and reflect back a version of their character. Now seated in the briefing room alongside the FBI's hopefuls and finest, Will inhaled deeply. Keeping his eyes focused on Crawford, he soaked in the Alpha's essence.

Will gave a brief profile of Jonathan Jerome born twenty-two years ago in Fork River, Idaho. Son of a wealthy businessman, he was the prime suspect in the abduction and probable murder of two Omega girls, one from Chicago and one from Fork River. The room was quiet and respectful as Will gave a succinct performance.

"Nineteen year old Macey Wagner disappeared one year ago from the apartment she shared with an old school friend. The friend worked nights and when she returned home one morning, she found the apartment in disarray and Macey missing. The police were called in and put a trace on Macey's bankcards. Ten days later they got a hit when Leif Stephens, a minor dealer, tried using her card at an ATM. When questioned he claimed he had found the cards. Later when he knew it was a possible homicide charge he co-operated. Stephens said on the day of Macey's disappearance he had loaned his car to a friend named Jonathan Jerome. Once returned Stephens found Macy's purse and cards in the trunk. The forensic team processed the vehicle; hair and blood samples were found to be a match to Macey. The police ran a check on Jerome and found three years earlier he had been a suspect in the disappearance of Juliette Meyer." Will paused and reached up with his hand to adjust his glasses.

"Juliette Meyer was an eighteen year old who lived in Fork River, Idaho. On the day of her disappearance, Juliette was staying with a family friend while her mom and sisters were away visiting a sick relative. When the friend arrived home from work and found no Juliette, she assumed the girl hand changed her mind and gone with her mother. Two days elapsed before it was discovered Juliette was in fact missing and the sheriff's office was notified. Friends of the girl told police that Jonathan Jerome had been harassing Juliette but when questioned Jerome denied any involvement in Juliette's disappearance. The case went cold then a deputy received a call from an Omega boy. He said he had loaned his car on the day Juliette went missing to Jonathan Jerome. The boy also said one night Jerome got drunk, said Juliette was buried on the Jerome ranch. Told the Omega if he ran his mouth, he would wind up next to her. Fearing for his life the Omega boy skipped town the next day."

"The boy wouldn't go on the record?" Jack queried.

Will gave a quick shake of the head. "He said he was only calling because he felt sorry for Juliette's family. Wanted them to know where she was."

"It would be safe to assume the sheriff's department had no luck in gaining permission to search the ranch?" Jorgensen inquired.

Will shook his head again. "It belongs to Jerome's father and he flatly refuses to co-operate. Without probable cause, there's no legal way to look."

"We could always pull another Wyoming, Jack." Jorgensen turned to Crawford. "Accidentally lose control of the scent dogs near the suspect's land."

"Nowadays even a bad lawyer would get the evidence thrown out of court." Will saw the flicker of a smile on Crawford's lips. Whatever the private joke was, Crawford wasn't sharing."

"You haven't any hard evidence the girl is on the land." Krendler had woken up and wanted to impress his team. His tone was mildly patronising.

"He'd keep the girls close." Will replied.

Krendler continued, no longer patronising more supercilious. "Experience shows murderers put distance between themselves and the body. He had use of a car. Why would he bury the body in his own backyard?"

"I don't have a floor plan of the Jerome house but I'm betting Juliette's buried where Jerome can see her grave from his bedroom or bathroom windows."

"Why those two rooms? Why not the kitchen or the family room?" Krendler scoffed.

"He likes privacy when he's jerking off. Violence is the only thing that makes him hard. He'd need a visual aid to imagine their final moments. His hands around their necks, watching them struggle. That's why he keeps them close." Krendler's expression of shock boosted Will. He had seen the same look on Crawford's face when at fourteen years old Will had profiled his first killer. The same look on the faces of all Alphas when Omegas stepped out of character. "Jerome has a reputation for being abusive towards Omega girls but no charges were ever filed. I'm guessing daddy intervened and paid the girls to keep quiet."

"So how are we going to nail this son of a bitch? " Crawford snarled.

"Jerome has developed the attitude that he's not gonna be caught. He is all seeing, all knowing. Bulletproof. Jack, he's gonna kill again unless we stop him. We have to go back to the beginning, back to Fork River and blindside him. The economics of the town have changed. Omegas are no longer dependent on a few wealthy benefactors so they will talk. We need to send in the right agents. The type who can quickly gain the trust of the townsfolk. Persuade the people into thinking they need to help put this killer away before he comes back to take another innocent Omega girl."

"Jack, we could use Edwards and McIntyre. They're great at giving solace while kicking ass. They're flying in from Chicago today to run through the updates." Jorgensen glowed with the satisfaction he had just made himself part of Team Graham.

"That's works for me." Crawford enthused. "I'll talk to Chicago and the sheriff's department at Fork River. Anything else?"

Will caught Jack's stare, could see the fire burning in his eyes now the hunt was on. "The Meyer family. They need to give interviews to the press, talk to the local radio stations. They have to make Juliette come alive again. Make her everybody's daughter, sister, sweetheart....."

"Omegas retreat into their shells after bereavement. You can't rely on the family's co-operation." Krendler remarked.

Will resented Krendler's stereotyping and allowed his feeling to seep into his words. "Omegas grieve long and hard. At first, Juliette Meyer's mother would have believed her daughter would turn up. As time passed and her hopes faded, she ended up living in a terrible world. All she wants is to be reunited with her daughter and for the killer to be punished. We are going to offer her the opportunity to participate."

Returning to their office Beverly and Will had caught the contagion of excitement bouncing back and forth ideas on the Jerome case. It was early afternoon when Jack waltzed into the office look self-assured.

"I spoke to the sheriff's department after the meeting and one of the detectives had a contact number for Mrs Meyer. She is staying at a retreat in Strasburg near the Shenandoah State Park. After he called her, she called me. She wasn't keen on collaborating until I told her we had an Omega working the case. She's on her way, Will and she wants to meet you."

Will froze like a deer in headlights with an eighteen-wheeler bearing down on it until Jack broke the spell.

"Just do your best, Will, that's all any of us can do." Then the Alpha instructed Will on how to handle himself during the meeting and in which direction the conversation should head.

Will was pacing as soon as Crawford left the office, the feeling of responsibility perched on his shoulders. One misstep on his part could foul his own plan. The change of pace of the investigation had thrown him. He retreated to his laptop searching for the Shenandoah State Park then finding it was home to one of the largest traditionalist churches, he relaxed. More radical than most, the church endorsed the concept of the inner well, a place where all the hurt in your life would be thrown. Only by allowing others access to your well could you dilute the pain and release yourself from its hold. To Will's way of thinking it was an attempt to cultivate group empathy and co-dependency but for a short time Will was prepared to mentally bask in that world.

Will caught site of the group in Jack's office just before entering. Mrs Meyer and her sister were seated side by side. Fair haired, petite and demure they looked fragile even to Will but he knew looks could be deceptive. Bowman sat in the left far corner, Jack had insisted the doctor be present as a precaution in case the women became overwrought. Will was not completely sure why he had agreed to Saul accompanying him but he was glad he did. He was finding comfort in his quiet strength and no small talk policy. It was a spur of the moment decision but before crossing the threshold, Will removed his tie and tucked it into his jacket pocket. Undoing the top two buttons of his shirt and adjusting the neckline, his collar was now openly displayed. Jack's introductions were brief and Will sat directly opposite the

women. Crawford apprised Mrs Meyer of the current standing of her daughter's case then smoothly handed over control of the meeting to Will.

Will made up which way his opening statement would go the second he saw the collar symbolising the traditionalist church nestled around the woman's neck.

"I want to stop the man who killed your daughter. The man who went on to kill Macey Wagner."

"You want him to spend the rest of his life in jail?" The words sounded more like an accusation than a question

"Locked up or dead. Don't care as long as he is stopped." Will parrotted the words Crawford had once said.

"You've lost someone?" The flicker of emotion across Will's face was confirmation.

"Yeah." Will prepared himself having anticipated the course of the conversation. "My mom, my dad, my sisters."

"They were taken not lost."

"It was a kidnapping gone wrong. I survived. No one else did. I was thirteen and alone." As Will spoke the southern accent he had long buried clawed its way to freedom.

"What were your parents like?"

"My mom and dad were always love to me." Will smiled warmly. "Didn't matter what stupid things I did, they were full of love and forgiveness."

"Do you remember exactly how you felt in the days after you knew they were gone?"

Will flinched as the door to the memory opened. It was like a knife slowly sliding across his gut, opening him up. "It was like melting, everything was spilling out of me."

Mrs Meyer rested her hands in her lap, her breathing quickened. "Losing a child, it's not easy staying sane afterwards. All I wanted to do was scream. Eventually, I looked for a spiritual answer. It was my way of dealing with it."

"You wake up one day and you're living in a nightmare. You don't know how you got there and you don't know how to get out. You're just desperate to wake up." Will gave a sad half-laugh. "It never happens."

"People always say putting the killer behind bars gives the family closure."

Will could feel her indignation. "There's no such thing as closure. I don't know what idiot came up with that phrase. I used to lay awake at night wishing I could turn back time so I could save them. For a while it was best that I kept the world a muffled distant. To my way of thinking, joining it again wouldn't be a wise decision. Things change, people change you."

"The wounds never heal, the pain never goes away. We pursue our lives because we have to."

"Being traumatised doesn't necessarily mean you are powerless. Whether it's personal revenge or seeing justice served, having a goal makes you stronger."

"I've struggled to keep what's left of my family together. The one who did this still has power over us. Does the one who did it to you still have power over you?"

"They're all dead." Will gave her a guileful smile. "It was them or me and I sure as hell knew it wasn't gonna be me."

The woman relaxed. "Thank you, thank you for understanding. What do you need from me?"

"The Jerome family? I need you to help me to see them."

"Jack Jerome was a wealthy businessman living in a small town throwing his money around like confetti. People's livelihoods were dependent on his generosity. He'd help people out when they were down on their luck or when they were sick. He had a detached way about him, always in control."

Crawford spoke quietly trying not to break the mood. "The local townsfolk were reluctant to talk. Were they intimated by threats of violence?"

"No, no threats. The folks were at his mercy. It was his money, his factory that kept the town going. There was those who thought Jack Jerome was a hero. His son was a different matter. When he was young he used to hang around the Omega kids. The Alpha kids didn't like him, thought he was soft. I heard Jack Jerome beating down on the boy, berating him because another kid had bloodied his nose. People felt sorry for the boy but when he got older that changed. He got taller and stronger and had this great reservoir of anger and resentment inside of him. He wanted to do what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. If he didn't get his way he would get mad. You learned to stay out of his range. He kept after Juliette wanting her to go out with him. Guess that's why he did what he did because she said no."

"We can't promise to fix the families. All we can do is try to bring them a little justice." Crawford said. "I give you my word we won't give up."

"One of the detectives who was first on the investigation promised me he would catch the killer and find my Juliette. When he called and promised me you would find her, I told him his promises were no good anymore."

Will leaned forward and covered Mrs Meyer's hands with his own. "Special Agent Crawford and his team rescued me. It wasn't easy but they never gave up. Believe me, Jack Crawford never gives up."

As her firewall weakened Mrs Meyer could no longer hide her sorrow. "I will do anything you ask if it means I can lay her to rest. What he took away, you can never replace. She wasn't just my daughter, she was my best friend. Please, please bring my baby home."

"Mrs Meyer, I will use every resource to find her." Jack got up from behind his desk and walked to the women, his emotions warred inside him. "Two agents from our Chicago office arrived an hour ago and after I've briefed them, we'll talk again. In the meantime my secretary will show you where you can freshen up."

The two women rose from their chairs and as they began to follow Crawford, Mrs Meyer stopped and placed a hand on Will's shoulder.

"Have you found your Alpha?" When Will nodded a reply she asked. "Is he strong?"

Will smiled coyly. "Yeah, he's very strong both in body and soul."

"Stay close to him." As the woman spoke Will felt a cold breeze on his neck. "You have a shadow following you."

"What the hell just happened?" Jack snarled after the women had left the room.

Jack's wrath slammed into the Omega. "I did what you asked. I persuaded her to help."

"From where I was sitting it sounded like you were suggesting we should kill Jonathan Jerome."

"Works for me." Will watched as Jack parked his rear back in his chair. "There's no cure for a mad dog, Jack, you just have to put him down."

"What's gotten into you, Will?"

"Janet Meyer is a traditionalist. They don't turn the other cheek. They believe in an eye for an eye." Agitated Will was up and pacing. "She needed someone to understand her, share her feeling of loss. So I shared."

"You were supposed to have a dialogue, establish a rapport not promote vigilantism."

"As I said, it works for me, Jack."

"Rude doesn't suit you, Will." Jack boiled with anger. "In the eyes of the law what was done to you didn't excuse what you did to McGreevy. It cost us the trial."

Will stopped abruptly and glared at the Alpha. "You don't get it, do you Jack? If an Alpha kid had been abducted and chained up like an animal, no one would have cared if he had killed his captors while escaping. He would have probably been given a medal. Because an Omega kid turned the tables they thought I was disturbed."

"You cannot represent the FBI and promote the idea of the people taking the law into their own hands. The FBI believes in due process."

"You told me once if you had a chance you would kill the Chesapeake Ripper. Ever heard of glass houses and stones?" Will sneered.

"I was blowing off steam behind closed doors." Jack's voice rose another notch. "Whether you like it nor not we put on a face when we are out there. That face tells people we make criminals accountable for their crimes by putting them behind bars. We do not endorse the traditionalist lust for revenge"

"Janet Meyer has family, Jack, other daughters. She lives in fear she will lose them." Will spat out. "Traditionalist churches offer protection. They're pack animals. You go after one of their own and they will turn on you, collectively. In the south they are feared. No one messes with them. Not even Alphas."

Jack's fist came down on the desk. "Our job is to catch the bad guys. Your job was to persuade her we would do our job."

"And I persuaded her by empathising. That's why I'm here, isn't it? I don't just empathise with murderers, I empathise with everybody." Will could hear his voice break. "I can't..... I can't always control it."

Jack knew distress when it was staring him in the face and pulled back on his anger. "Well, at least she's on our side."

"I used to feel bad about what happened to McGreevy right up until Hobbs was cutting my throat." Will said, calming his breathing. "I'm not sorry they're all dead, Jack. You get tired of looking over your shoulder, constantly feeling afraid. Mrs Meyer will never feel safe while Jonathan Jerome is out in the world."

"Between these four walls, Jerome could get run over by a garbage truck tomorrow and that would suit me fine."

Will gave a weak smile. "So long as Mrs Meyer isn't driving the truck."

Jack shook his head and grinned. "Get out of here, Will. Go home and be with your kids."

With the atmosphere less charged Bowman seized his opportunity. "Jack, if there's nothing else I've reports to finish."

"Of course, doctor. I'm afraid things between Will and I can get a little heated."

Pushing out of his chair Bowman called to Will. "What did Mrs Meyer mean, Will? About the shadow?"

Will glanced at Bowman. "Aw, that's just an old traditionalist belief."

"Next time you're free I'd like to hear it." Bowman stated.

The tap on the office door was followed by the appearance of Jack's secretary, note pad in her hand. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Jack, but there's was a call from the Baltimore police. They need to talk to Mr Graham urgently."

Will froze, the scenarios raced through his head at the words. He saw the car overturned in a ditch. Hannibal and the kids....

"It wasn't a clear connection, lots of background noise, but I think the officer said it concerned..." She looked down at her pad. "Freddie Chilton."

"Frederick Chilton? Doctor Frederick Chilton?" Jack asked.

"Yes." She turned her head towards Will. "Apparently he's under arrest."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So what's he done?" Zeller asked after Will had received another text message.

"Abel won't say. Said he doesn't want to spoil the surprise." Will slipped his cell back into his pocket at his second attempt. The urge to close his eyes and drift off was overwhelming. "All I know is what the desk sergeant told me. Frederick was at some kinda protest."

Zeller kept his eyes firmly on the road. The weight of the traffic meant they were not travelling at speed which gave Zeller some relief. Over the years he had patched up plenty of casualties from automobile accidents and had no desire to become one. "Frederick has never seemed the protesting type. I know he complains but he does it behind the scenes."

"That was before he fell under the spell of the sainted Barbara."

"Barbara?" Zeller couldn't place the name.

"Barbara Komeda. Werner Komeda's widow. After her husband died she trained to become a bereavement counsellor and works at the Sanctuary two afternoons a week."

Zeller recalled being introduced to the small dark haired woman standing by the side of Werner Komeda, the multi-millionaire philanthrophist. "Yes, I remember her. I heard some good things about her."

"She's a great lady. Very kind and thoughtful. Since she's been at the Sanctuary, well, let's say love is in the air where Frederick is concerned."

"So you think Frederick's protesting has something to do with Mrs Komeda?"

"He's trying to impress her. Abel said Frederick bought a new shaver and not for his beard. He's been trimming down south."

"Down south?"

"Aw, Zeller, you know, manscaping." Will snorted.

"Oh God, Will, oh God, no." Zeller exclaimed. "Why the hell did you have to tell me?"

"I like to share." Will said smugly

"Gee thanks, Will, thank you so much." Zeller gave a sly grin when the payback came to him. "Hey, Will, did I ever tell you about the guy who came into ER because he used a straight razor to deforest?"

Will gave a groan as he covered his ears with his hands and waited for his brother-in law's lips to stop moving.

Will took a deep breath as he crossed the lobby of the Baltimore Police Department. Having turned down Zeller's offer to accompany him, there was an odd sense of triumph as he stood in front of the enquiry desk. A few weeks ago, he wouldn't have done this on his own. The desk sergeant, an Omega named Doyle, was younger and meatier than Will had expected. Instructing Will to wait, the man hitched up his trousers as he walked towards the uniformed officer loitering beside the door marked private. Will observed the two men as they engaged in conversation until the sergeant beckoned Will over and he followed them through the doorway. They walked along the corridor then down a short flight of stairs and entered a brightly lit area which marked the entrance to the holding cells. Will saw Abel on the far side with his arms folded across his chest and his back against the wall, looking decidedly bored. The sergeant placed himself behind a desk and pulled open the top drawer. Taking out a white form, he handed it to Will.

"We haven't booked him. We ordered the protestors to disperse. Most were kids who got caught up in the moment. Once they received the warning, they were happy to fade away. Your Doctor Chilton refused to back down. We had to remove him physically from the building."

Will skipped through the uniformed cop's report and returned it to the sergeant. There was enough detail to enable Will to build a broader picture of the events leading up to Frederick's detention.

"There was no criminal damage." Will was thankful for small mercies where Frederick was concerned.

"Just shouting and pushing. We arrived before things turned ugly."

"Why were they protesting?"

"The Beta unions. They're fighting against the proposed changes to the Omegan Rights Bill. They and the Zealot churches have joined forces, been holding meetings across Maryland to rally support."

"What do I have to do to make this go away?" Will was too tired to try to charm the officer.

"Make him see sense. He gives me his word he'll stay out of trouble until this dog and pony show has left town, then he's free to go."

Will nodded not finding anything unreasonable in the proposal. "Can I talk to him? I might be able to persuade him."

The sergeant mumbled a few words to the other officer who sauntered out of sight then turned his attention back to Will.

"The doctor said you're a relative."

"He was my legal guardian. Still is in some ways." Will replied. "He took me in after my parents died."

"His friend over there." The man jabbed his hand in the direction of Abel. "He said Chilton runs the Sanctuary."

"Yeah, he does good work." Will finally took notice of Abel who seemed lost in another world. "Why didn't you bail him out, Abel?"

"Apparently they had an issue with my curriculum vitae." Gideon replied without moving position. "I appear in their system as renowned surgeon and serial killer. I am uncertain which profession made me unsuitable to act as a negotiator."

Will knew Gideon had embroidered the facts. However, he was certain Abel would be found in the database as being convicted of multiple homicides before being cleared of all charges. Despite the promises, records were never entirely expunged.

Doyle gave a shrug. "I wasn't taking any chances. When they said you were a FBI agent, I thought you'd be our best shot to clear up this mess."

"I'm a consultant, a temporary posting." Will clarified.

"Good luck with that. I completed the training and lasted six months. The Alpha agents were real assholes, always setting Omegas up for the fall."

Will heard Frederick carping before he rounded the corner. The Beta was indignant and held his head high until he saw Will then the façade evaporated. For a moment, Will thought Frederick was gong to burst into tears.

"Oh, Will, Will." Frederick whined forgetting about the audience. "It's been hideous. Stripped of my freedom and dignity because I dared to stand up to tyranny."

"Hey, Frederick, don't worry. I'm gonna get you outta here. Okay?" Will said tenderly.

"There was no privacy, Will. I had to beg to use the facilities."

"Hey." Doyle interrupted. "We gave you the cell with the toilet."

"But there was no door or curtain. Anyone could see me. How could I possibly go with a thousand eyes set on me?"

"You were the only one down there." Doyle almost snarled, resenting the implication that Frederick's treatment was anything but professional.

"It's okay, Frederick." Will placed a hand on Frederick's shoulder. "I'm gonna take you home. We just need to give the sergeant some assurances."

"Assurances? What assurances? I haven't gone through all this tribulation to end up on my knees yielding to the oppressors." Frederick remonstrated. "I'd rather take my chances in the pokey than to bow down to slave masters."

"This is the problem, Graham. We almost get him out of here and then he brings out the drama queen." Doyle called out to Frederick. "Hey, sweet cheeks, we don't want your company, you're not that special."

"Listen, Frederick." Will bracketed the Beta's upper arms with his hands. "Just promise to behave while these idiots hold their meetings then you can go home."

"You didn't hear them, Will, the things they were saying. Those idiots as you so rightly named them are Betas. Will, it made me ashamed of my own dynamic."

"Frederick, I'm an Omega, I've heard these things all my life." Will said fondly. "I don't need you or anyone else fighting my battles."

"The kid's right, Frederick." Doyle announced. "Omegas don't need the other dynamics babying their asses. We'll get there in our own way."

"Well, I know whose side you are on. I notice none of the clergy have been arrested." Frederick snorted.

"Hey, Chilton. They were not being offensive. Obnoxious maybe but nothing that warranted arrest." Doyle snapped.

"Nothing I said was profane." Frederick countered loftily.

"You were disruptive. You refused to leave the building. You shouted at my officer." Doyle turned to his colleague. "What did he say?"

"*You should know better than to bait a Beta. This Beta's got balls."* The other man replied.

"You called the Zealot archdeacon....." Doyle looked at the paper in his hand. *"a soulless sucker of Satan's rod."*

"Has someone been coaching you, Frederick?" Will turned to Abel. "Have you been coaching him?"

"I merely pointed out profanity was for the feeble. It is far better to have a repertoire of well-rehearsed insults at hand." A mischievous smile formed on Abel's face.

"Listen, I'll make it easy for you." Doyle said. "If you stay I can guarantee the next batch of drunks will be placed in the cell next to you. Believe me, Frederick, you won't want to watch them spewing their guts."

"Frederick, please. I don't want anything bad to happen to you." Will entreated.

"Very well. I give you my word that I will refrain from protesting while those bigots are in town."

"Hallelujah." Doyle sang out. "I'll grab his belongings then you can get him out of here."

As he pushed his chair back and made his way to the lock up room, Doyle called back to Will. "Hey, Graham. This FBI posting, I hope it works out. We need at least one Omega to make it through the minefield."

Will arrived home late and hadn't expected to see Willow still awake, curled up in her father's lap. His intentions, after unwinding, were to go upstairs and watch the children sleeping before scraping a meal together. He had made it across the threshold of the sitting room before they heard him. Willow scrambled from the security of Hannibal's arms and ran to greet her Papa. Will dropped to his knees, arms stretched out wide, he gathered up his little Omega and breathed in her scent.

Robert gave Will a quick glance and smile before returning to the television screen.

"More Winnie the Pooh?" Will asked.

Will heard an exaggerated wonderment in his father-in-law's voice when he replied. "No, Thundercats."

With Willow clinging tightly when he stood up, Will softly whispered to his daughter. "Say goodnight."

Waving her little hand over his shoulder, she chirped "Goodnight, daddy, goodnight, grandfather" as her Papa carried her to her bedroom.

Zeller's old room was now a palette of white and pastel pink with a mix of kitten and butterfly decals adorning two walls. The night light gave out an ambient glow and Will could see Ella sleeping peacefully in her bed, her teddy bear tucked in beside her. Will waited until Willow settled her head on her pillow before drawing up the comforter.

"Go straight to sleep now, honey and I'll come check on you after dinner." Will kissed her lightly on the cheek. His face broke into a wide smile when Willow gave her best approximation of her sleeping face complete with pouty lips.

With the sound of high heat sizzles and the rocking of the wok coming from the kitchen, Will knew Hannibal had beaten him to the punch and was preparing his dinner. Wanting to feel solid ground under his feet, Will slipped off his shoes before entering the kitchen.

"What's cooking?" Will sniffed the air as he walked to the cabinet where he stored his few remaining bottles of apple cider.

"Trout and a medley of stir fried vegetables. Mrs Foster provided the baguettes."

Will hummed in anticipation as he took a bottle and prised off the cap with the fancy opener bearing the DuMaurier crest. Taking a sip from the bottle as he reached for a tumbler he murmured. "You're spoiling me."

Will filled the tumbler half way and took a few gulps before noticing the lack of conversation. Watching Hannibal turn off the stove and scoop the vegetables into a serving dish, Will placed the drink down on the counter and walked to the Alpha. Placing a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, he squeezed gently, until the Alpha acknowledged his presence with a turn of his head.

Will had lowered his defences since their reconciliation and could feel he had failed the Alpha once again. Sinking under a wave of hopelessness and indecision Will dreaded asking. "What's wrong?"

"The children were worried, Will. When you texted me to say you were leaving police headquarters, I estimated how long before you would reach home. You were forty minutes later than expected."

"Frederick wouldn't shut up and Abel decided to drop him at the Sanctuary first." Will could hear the desperation as he tried to explain. "By the time we got him inside and quietened down, I didn't notice how late we were running."

"The children should be your priority."

The tone of the admonishment didn't hurt but the truth behind it did. In all the excitement he hadn't thought once about the children. Unable to summon an adequate excuse, Will was stunned into shame. He felt a rogue tear run down his face and quickly wiped it away. Will was aware Hannibal hated anything which could be construed as manipulation. Self-pity was top of the list but crying in order to elicit forgiveness came a close second. Suddenly the arms were around him, hugging him and Will buried his head into the Alpha's chest.

"This is new to me, Will. I am used to knowing exactly where you are, knowing exactly where I can find you." The Alpha's fingertips caressed the side of the Omega's face wiping away an additional tear.

Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's muscular frame and squeezed. Being barefoot exacerbated their difference in height. The Alpha was tall, strong, smelt good and Will loved it. As his inner child lapped up the sensation that this Alpha was his, Will instinctively rubbed his cheek against Hannibal's chest to mark his territory. Will heard the rumble of forgiveness when Hannibal laughed at the Omega's antics. The Alpha pulled back and cupped Will's chin.

"It was not my intention to upset you, *grazus*." Hannibal gazed into Will's eyes and murmured. "I was also worried, Will."

Will settled on the kitchen stool as Hannibal presented him with the meal. The choice between eating in a empty dining room or at the kitchen island, watching his Alpha clear away the cooking utensils, was a no-brainer. Will made short work of the dish not realising until he took the first mouthful he had not eaten since noon. Hannibal chatted about the children while Will informed his mate of the event which had occurred at Quantico, keeping up his end of their bargain. He glossed over his meeting with Mrs Meyer with ease and downplayed his argument with Jack. Comparing Crawford with Frederick by suggesting Jack had taken on the mantel of an over-protective nanny appeared to amuse the Alpha.

Empathising with the people around him was part of Will's life whether he wanted to or not but he could never entirely read the Alpha. By the tone of his voice or by the way he moved, Will was able to judge if Hannibal was happy or sad but underneath the bonhomie and calm exterior there was a repository of pent up emotions which the Alpha ferociously guarded. Occasionally Will wished the Alpha would briefly part at the seams so Will could witness the pyroclastic flow of joy, anger, passion and pain. Perhaps in a different life Hannibal would have been Will's must to avoid but now it was too late. They were tied together by an invisible thread and Will couldn't contemplate a life without the Alpha.

Will drank the last of his cider as Hannibal took away the empty plates and began to stack the dishwasher.

"I have to attend the fundraiser auction on Friday. Although mother has agreed to partner me, she is happy to stand aside if you wish to attend."

Will rolled his eyes before speaking, the embarrassment still ripe. "You're better off with your mom. The last time you took me I ended up bidding against you by mistake."

Hannibal's smile assuaged Will from the guilt of turning down the offer. It was a smile Hannibal had perfected over the years, the smile guaranteed to disguise his disappointment.

Will was curled up next to the Alpha like a contented cat. The even rhythm of the Omega's breathing was hypnotic and the Alpha's eyes slowly closed welcoming sleep. The creak of the stairs first alerted him and when he heard the turning of the door handle Hannibal sat upright now fully awake. The moment the figure in a white robe glided into the bedroom, Hannibal flicked on the side light. Bedelia accustomed herself to the brightness before moving closer to her son. Lightly touching his arm she whispered.

"Willow's awake. She is calling for Will."

Without hesitation, Hannibal climbed out of bed and grabbed his robe, following his mother down the stairs and along the hallway. Reaching the top of the main staircase, they parted, Hannibal making his way to his daughter while Bedelia returned to her room. Willow sat on her bed with her legs pulled up, hugging her knees and on seeing Hannibal enter the room she pleaded.

"Papa?"

Bending over her, she clung to him. Feeling her small hands around his neck, he lifted her and carried her back to his bedroom. Hannibal deposited his daughter onto the bed and she skimmed across the silk sheets latching koala style on to her Papa. Hannibal disrobed taking his place in the bed next to the Omegas and adjusted the sheets. Positioning his arm to embrace both his child and his mate, Hannibal listened to Will's comforting low key purring and was gradually soothed into sleep.

Will reached his office in time to see two men carry his desk into the corridor, dumping it unceremoniously to one side. Inside the room a woman barked out an order.

"Take it to storage. **Now.**"

Will braced himself for trouble as he squeezed past the men. Beverly looked up from her desk, her eyes flashing him a warning, as Will entered the room. His files and work equipment packed around her, Beverly offered an apology.

"Sorry, Will, they wouldn't wait so I had to move your stuff."

Will looked at the replacement desk standing in the space which the break room reject had previously occupied. Elegant and stylish, Will wanted to smooth his hand over its polished veneer.

"Which one of you is Katz?" The woman snarled and Beverly tentatively held up one hand. "So you're the joker who made the complaint."

"No, I am." Will jumped not realising Saul stood behind him. The woman threw an icy look and Will immediately shuffled to one side not wanting to be caught in the crossfire.

"You're Katz?" The woman sounded confused. "She said she's Katz."

"We are both Katz." Saul replied.

"And you're the Katz who complained?"

"Correct."

"What gave you the right to criticise me?"

"You didn't do your job."

"Do you know how many requisitions I have to complete in one day?" The woman said disdainfully.

"No."

"Would you care to guess?"

"No."

"I provide all office equipment for both here and the academy." She announced.

"That's impressive. What's your point?"

"My point is I'm busy."

"Too busy to do your job effectively?"

"You don't seem to understand." The ground under the woman suddenly became shaky.

"I understand you were instructed to supply a suitable desk. I understand the furniture you supplied was defective which may have resulted in serious injury for one or all of us working in this room. I understand an injured party could have brought a personal injury lawsuit against the FBI. I also understand such a lawsuit would have sparked an internal investigation which would have led back to you. I hope you understand if the scenario I just described had taken place your contract with the FBI would have been terminated." Saul's face and tone remained impassive as he delivered his coup de grace. "In fact, by complaining, I've probably saved your sorry ass."

Slack-jawed and red faced the woman stood confounded then abruptly exited pushing past Saul. As the sound of her clip clopping heels faded, Beverly spanked her hands together and whooped.

By virtue of shorter hair, subdued clothing and glasses, the Omega was just another dark suit moving along the FBI's corridors. Full of purpose, Will made his way Jack's office. Crossing the threshold, Will felt comfortable, confident and alive.

Crawford took the notes Will handed him and skimmed over them with no outward sign of emotion. He stood patiently as Jack leaned back in his chair.

"Jack, it would make sense for Jerome to store Macey where he could visit her without gathering attention. He worked in an automobile repair shop and they had large steel drums on the premises. After killing her he placed her body in the container, loaded it onto the firm's truck and took her God knows where. That's why he willingly handed over his car to the tech guys. He'd used another vehicle to transport her."

"I'll pass this over to Edwards and McIntyre."

"Jack, if we look at his bank and cell phone records I'd probably see a pattern." Will implored.

"We need probably cause or strong circumstantial to get the warrant." Jack replied.

"Jack, everything points to Jerome."

"Judges today are wary of signing warrants. Impinging on a person's civil rights is currently an issue."

"So because some bleeding heart liberals care more about the rights of a perpetrator than the victim we get hog tied. If this was a Senator's daughter who was missing they'd pull out all the stops." Will protested.

"I am not disagreeing with you, Will, but we have to work within the system. You know the drill. It always comes back to the evidence. When it's double homicide the burden of proof is very high." Crawford offered his wisdom in a fatherly manner.

"Nobody is going to hand us that bone, Jack, we are gonna have to dig it up ourselves."

"Edwards and McIntyre are in place. All the ingredients are in the pot. Now we sit back and let it stew." The Alpha inhaled deeply before continuing. "Krendler's uncovered a trafficking ring from way back in the day that is still active. A task force is about to be deployed. As of now you are officially back on the Craven case."

Will appreciated Jack's honesty and clarity but occasionally he wanted to give the man a shake. Will gave Jack a smile of acquiescence but had already begun to map out his movements having decided to take matters into his own hands.

Adapting to Saul's presence had resulted in a few irritating changes to the Omega's routine but overall Will found himself warming to the man. He passed the Craven file over to his almost constant companion and said "See what you make of the forensics."

The Omega watched Saul out of his peripheral vision as the agent quickly scanned through the pages. Saul had a quiet stillness to his manner as if he was keeping his thoughts to himself.

"It's full of assumptions. It would appear some of the basics have been overlooked."

Will nodded in agreement then called over his shoulder to Beverly. "Did anyone create a profile of the Parkwood slayer?"

"Yeah." Beverly replied without looking up. "There was a difference of opinion between Macready from the Chicago office and Jorgensen. Macready said the killer had all the hallmarks of an Omega while Jorgensen said it was a Beta."

Will knew from experience that profiling a case through a dynamic bias would alter the findings. "Is Macready a Beta?"

"Nope." Came Beverly's reply. "He's an Alpha."

"I'm missing something." Will scraped his hand through his hair and sighed. "I need to look at the murder board."

Will knew it was a mistake when he and Saul entered the briefing room. Krendler and his team were bunched up in one corner and Will tasted the hostility that greeted his arrival. Trailed by Saul, Will carried on walking towards the board at the far end of the room. He quietened his apprehension by pretending Krendler was not present.

Will studied the photographs of the victims lying lifeless in their homes, the close ups of the wounds and map of the Slayer's playground in Chicago. Underneath each image were the pertinent facts, ages, occupations, relationships and timelines leading up the murders. The columns where the identities of witnesses and suspects were usually written were devoid of any names.

"Hey, Graham, how's the training going? I hear you're going undercover for VCAC." Will ignored Krendler's question and focused on the timelines. He heard a muted comment then a short burst of laughter followed by the sound of a chair being pushed back. As the footsteps got closer, Will tried to regulate his breathing. The fear inside him wound up in a tight ball began to unravel and he froze.

"You'll make a damned good agent, Will." Krendler said standing by the Omega's side. "With your looks and your shy Omega appeal, I'm sure you'll infiltrate any trafficking organisation. Yeah, I'm sure they'll swallow anything you offered. Your cover story, I mean, of course."

Will felt his face flush and managed a pitiable *"Get lost."* in response.

"Oh, come on, darling, don't be like that. You know how to manipulate people. You did a great job on Garrett Jacob Hobbs." Krendler turned to Saul. "I heard you got shot trying to rescue some Omega girls who were locked in a cage. Now Will was in a similar situation except when they tried to free him he screamed for his abductor. Some say it was Stockholm syndrome, others say he liked the attention Garrett Jacob Hobbs gave him. Liked how Hobbs kept his Omega warm at night."

Krendler gave a sly smile and began to retreat. "You should be careful, Will. What with being Jack's blue-eyed boy and Garrett's pretty little boy, people are bound to talk. Maybe wonder exactly what you do to be so popular. What tricks you have up your sleeve or in your pants."

Will bit his bottom lip hard to stop it from trembling and to prevent the tears from welling up. Crying in front of this Alpha was an invitation to attack.

"My, my, what do we have here?" Jorgensen walked slowly towards them . "It sounds like you've started the party without me."

"This is none of your business, Jorgensen?" Krendler snapped, angry at the intervention. "What the hell do you want?"

"You, actually. I was passing your office approximately...." The Beta lifted an arm and glanced at his watch. "Three minutes and twenty seconds ago. There was a man patiently waiting for you. I told him I would look for you. I did, however, explain as you're prone

to drinking on duty and chasing after female employees, I couldn't guarantee what state you'd be in when I found you."

Disbelief appeared on Krendler's face until Jorgensen added. "He gave his name as Ackerman and I believe he's from the Attorney General's office."

"Fuck you." Krendler spat out as he began to run.

Will did not look when he heard the others scurrying after Krendler. He felt degraded and wanted to run away and hide.

"You should avoid him like you would the plague." Jorgensen took the folders he held and offered them to the Omega. "Everything I have on the Craven case."

Will took them gingerly, scanning Jorgensen's face. "Why are you helping me?"

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend. That sums up our current relationship." As he made to move, the Beta paused. "That asshole was right about one thing. You are Jack's blue-eyed boy and unfortunately, that's made you a target. Jack hasn't just put you on a pedestal, Will, he's chained you to it."

"I thought you didn't like me?" Will said.

"I don't dislike you, Will. To me you're still the same annoying brat I met all those years ago. The one I learned to tolerate. The truth is I'm green-eyed jealous of your skill set. It isn't just youth which is wasted on the young." Jorgensen started to walk away before stopping. "Krendler has talked up his hypothesis on the Craven case all the way to the top. That's his weakness. If you prove him wrong you'll cut him down to size."

As Jorgensen reached the exit, he called out. "Go get him, kid."

An awkward silence surrounded Will and Saul after the others had left and the Omega resumed staring at the board. Will sensed the Alpha's need to offer some support and his struggle to find the appropriate words. Based on the little he knew of the man, Will closed his eyes and attempted to profile his colleague. Confident he had found the right approach, Will decided to speak.

"I was too young to deal with Hobbs and there was no one left to protect me. Luckily, I'm kinda obstinate so I learned to fight back. They say it's not the size of the dog in a fight but the fight in the dog that matters. That's how I survived. If you want to know more then talk to Beverly. I'll be fine with that. For me looking back isn't an option. It dredges up the nightmares."

"Obstinacy is underrated." Saul said quietly. "So are Omegas."

Will and Saul spent longer in the briefing room than intended, bouncing ideas off each other. Saul's view of the Slayer was clinical but the Omega didn't mind. He enjoyed being in the company of someone who did not bring emotional baggage to the table. Beverly didn't take

much notice when they returned to the office and continued reading a multi page report. Ready to go home, Will gathered the files together and crammed them into his messenger bag. Noticing the small white box on the table, he picked it up and looked inside. The gut sinking feeling on seeing the content overwhelmed him and he threw the box with force into the trash bin. Slinging the strap of his bag over his shoulder, he faked a smile and said his goodbyes. Saul waited until he was sure the Omega would not be returning then casually made his way over to the bin and retrieved the item. He drew a steady breath and controlled his responses as he took the pacifier out of the box and held it aloft.

"Will gave me permission to talk to you about his past. Perhaps now is a good time to enlighten me."

The band of pain around the Omega's head was tighter by the time he arrived home. Having successfully hidden his distress from Zeller by concentrating on the files during their journey, he put on his happy mask as soon as he entered the house. The children made him laugh as he listened to their adventures and he deliberately lost himself in their world. He didn't notice the absence of Bedelia and Robert until later, forgetting they were dining at Sutcliffe House.

Assuming the role of parent, he took charge of the girls while Hannibal took the boys. Bathing them and helping them change into their nightclothes, Ella chose her pink nightdress while Willow picked the dog print pyjamas, his experiences during the day gradually lost their bite. Reading a bedtime story was one of Will's favourite pastimes especially as the tales always enthralled the girls. Afterwards they switched to idle chatter as he turned off the main light and settled them for sleep. Talking about how their grandfather lost his cane and how they had helped him find it, Ella innocently dropped the bombshell.

"Daddy's like grandfather. Daddy forgets things. He forgot Tomas."

"He left Tom Tom all alone." Willow added, emphasising the words *all alone*.

Puzzled Will sat on the corner of Willow's bed and gently encouraged the girls to tell their story.

Exhaustion had finally caught up with Hannibal and he sprawled in the recliner. His one consolation was the thought he could spend some quality time with his Omega and for a while pretend to be master of his own home. Hannibal heard the sitting room door open and moved slightly forward to see Will standing in the doorway.

"Preachers tell you to cast out your sins. You should start with the sin of omission." Will boomed.

Irritated by the Omega's thoughtlessness, Hannibal snapped. "Keep your voice down, Will, you will wake the children."

The Omega turned and closed the door then spun round. His blue eyes smoked with fury as he advanced on the Alpha.

"You guilt tripped me over the children." He hissed. "You said they should be my priority. Can you comprehend how bad I felt leaving them every time Zeller picked me up? Do you understand how much the kids mean to me? How much I worry about them?"

"Will, what is wrong?" Hannibal asked as he pushed from the chair and faced the Omega.

"You fucking hypocrite. Didn't you realise I would find out?" Will growled.

"Will?" Confused, Hannibal was lost for words.

"How the fuck could you have left him alone. He's a baby, a defenceless little baby. You fucking moron." The Omega snarled.

Will launched himself at the Alpha, his right fist aimed at Hannibal's mouth. Shocked by the attack Hannibal blocked the blow by quickly raising his left arm. Attempting to subdue the Omega, he grabbed a handful of Will's shirt. Too late, as the left fist connected with his chin, Hannibal remembered Will could swing hard with both hands.

Chapter End Notes

Grazus - Lithuanian for beautiful

Chapter 10

Hannibal's head rolled from the blow when the fist landed. Grabbing the Omega, Hannibal spun the boy sideways. A sweep of his foot knocked the support from under Will. Controlling the boy's fall, Hannibal cried out as his ear was viciously twisted and swatting at the Omega's hand, he released his hold. Will's back hit the coffee table, its spindly legs buckling under the force and as the table tilted, he slid to the floor. Scrambling to his feet, the boy turned to face his target. Hannibal, now several feet away, stood loose limbed ready for another attack. Wiping the blood away from his lip with the back of his hand, the Alpha glanced at the damaged table.

"Father will be pleased." Hannibal said cheerfully. "He hated that table."

Heart pounding and jaw set, Will was incensed by the arrogance oozing out of the man. Brimming with anger, he wanted punch the smile from Hannibal's face. Will lunged at the Alpha only to watch him dance away. After another attempt and another, the outcome never changed. The Alpha was skilled in the art of avoiding physical contact. Knowing it was futile, Will's shoulders slumped and he fought against the tears of frustration.

"Please stop, Will, I do not want to injure you." Hannibal pleaded.

Breathing rapidly, Will shook his head slowly. "Lousy end to a lousy day."

The Alpha could feel the fight leaving the boy and approached him one step at a time. The boy's eyes were a darker shade of blue and still glistened menacingly. Now within easy reach, the Alpha extended his arm only to stagger back when Will's open hands slammed into his chest. He advanced a second time and although the response was identical its ferocity had waned. Hannibal put his hand on the boy's shoulder only to have it shrugged off.

"I made a terrible mistake, Will, and deserve your contempt. But your anger, there is another reason behind it. We need to talk, Will, not fight." Cautiously Hannibal rested his hand on the slope of the boy's neck.

There was a look of hopelessness in the boy's eyes. They both knew Hannibal's reluctance to share feelings or talk about inner thoughts was the major flaw in their marriage.

"I need someone who'll listen to me not lecture me." Will said dejectedly.

The Alpha weighed up the situation and considered his response. When he was twenty-four he was already on the first rungs of the ladder to success and had grown used to dealing with people from all age groups, dynamics and levels of society. Will, now at the same age, was closeted and lonely, having no one in whom he could confide. Another time Hannibal would have suggested Will's actions were immature but he derived no pleasure from scenting the boy's distress. His Alphan nature needed the sweetness that exuded from the Omega when under his protection.

Hannibal's fingertips stroked the sensitive skin over the bonding gland, gentling the Omega into compliance. As the tension between them eased, Will moved closer to the Alpha and was pulled into an embrace. As Hannibal's fingers combed through the boy's curls, Will stayed silent soaking up the tenderness. "I will clear away the debris while you check on the children. Then we will talk and I will listen without commenting. I give you my word."

Will's first stop was their bedroom where he stripped and put on freshly washed jeans and a tee. His day clothes smelt of Quantico and he didn't want a constant reminder of his problems. He padded throughout the house making sure the children were sleeping, standing for a while watching their little chests rise and fall with every breath. Each time he gazed at their faces and inhaled their scent, a feeling of awe crept over him and he gave thanks to his Alpha for helping to create his perfect family.

On his return Will found the sitting room tidy with no indication a fight had occurred. The remnants of the table had disappeared and had been replaced by the Captains' chest which had sat in the sunroom. Used to store discarded toys and colouring books, it now supported an opened bottle of Pinot Noir and two glasses. Hannibal walked into the room and placed the tray he was carrying onto the chest.

"As dinner was past its best I have provided chicken and pheasant sandwiches, crust less, of course. There are also beetroot and capsicum relishes to choose from."

"No ketchup?" Will joked. When Hannibal gave him the look that said *blasphemer,* a wide grin spread across Will's face.

They sat in silence while they ate and Will's mind roamed over the events of the day, disturbed he had allowed them to follow him home.

Will kept his story simple, avoiding over dramatizing Krendler's insults. Hannibal sat quietly but as Will progressed with his account, Will noticed the subtle changes in the man's body language. A sharp intake of breath or a shifting of position spoke volumes. When he talked about the insinuations made about his relationship with Hobbs and saw the Alpha's hands slowly curl into fists, Will shivered. Aware the Alpha's brain was hard-wired to keep his Omega safe was a fact Will found alarming and thrilling.

Hannibal leaned back into the couch, sipped his wine then talked of the fear which seized him when he had realised he had left Tomas behind and his rising panic as he drove home. Will was fascinated how the incident had profoundly affected Hannibal having expected a different reaction. He had imagined the Alpha downplaying the event when he spoke about it. Instead, Hannibal offered no defence and berated himself for his own arrogance and stupidity, admitting he had endangered their small son. Will laughed when the Alpha talked about the payback, how Tomas had urinated over his father but the mood quickly changed.

"If Tomas had ..." Hannibal's voice tailed off. "You would never have forgiven me and neither would have I."

"He's safe, Han, nothing bad happened. He's like his dad, tough as nails." Empathising with his Alpha, Will pulled back when hit by Hannibal's range of contrasting emotions.

Will finished his wine, putting his glass aside, he turned to the Alpha.

"I got so heated today I needed to lash out or implode." Will glanced at Hannibal feeling guilty. "I don't like the way my past keeps being used against me. It's not me feeling sorry for myself, it just hurts when people believe I was a maniac's willing bitch."

"People will believe what they wish to believe. You survived against the odds and that is difficult for them to comprehend." The Alpha said, a flicker of anger in his voice. "What people do not understand can either intrigue them or frighten them."

"They would have preferred for me to be broken?"

"In the rarefied air of the liberal north, Omegas are still stereotyped and patronised. Stop seeing yourself through the eyes of others, Will. They do not know you which makes their opinion without worth. You have to show them who you are."

"So either I get a handle on it or crawl away." Will stated bluntly.

"Your inner radar can detect other people's weaknesses so use it, not to wound but to warn. Once people are wary of you, they will not attack so readily." Hannibal said softly.

"I thought if I melted into the shadows I'd be okay."

"You are mercurial, Will, and that makes you exciting. You bring out the best in people and the worst." Hannibal's eyes met Will's and he smiled. His little spitfire was now calm and serene. "You also look very beautiful when you are angry."

Will huffed out a derisory laugh. "I look plain stupid."

"You look beautiful and dangerous." Cupping the boy's face with his hands, Hannibal kissed him gently, his tongue grazing over the Omega's lips. Will, starved of touch, responded passionately.

Breaking free, Will gave into sentiment. "I don't know where I would be without you. I love you so much it hurts."

Hannibal's gaze wandered over the Omega's face. He ached for the boy, wanted to caress him, taste him, pin the boy beneath him. Preparing to claim another kiss, the Alpha murmured. "I know the feeling well."

Robert's office was bathed in morning sunshine and Will and the Alpha sat at the desk clutching their files to their chest. After the breakfast bustle then the kissing and waving goodbye to his children, Will welcomed the peaceful setting.

"I've got something." Will said mysteriously.

"So have I." Robert smiled. "After you, William."

"After you, Colonel." Will insisted.

The Omega tradition of naming an Alpha in-law was considered by psychologists as an important signifier as to whether a married Omega had bonded with the Alpha's family. To an Omega, the reasoning behind the choice of the *"tribute name"* was the ultimate display of respect and affection. Will had named Bedelia soon after he had married into the family but it had taken him longer to honour Robert. Will's relationship with his father-in-law was relaxed; they shared the same passion for history and social justice. Unlike most of the members of the family, Will and Robert both possessed an offbeat sense of humour. The Alpha had often spoken of the British officer who had been part of the peacekeeping force stationed in Lithuania during the period when the country almost descended into civil war. The more Robert spoke of how Colonel Fox had become his mentor, the more Will could see the parallels.

When asked by Robert why he had chosen the name Colonel, Will gave a thoughtful reply. "*A colonel is a man of courage and compassion. He guides with enthusiasm but treads carefully. He encourages people rather than pressurises them and when surrounded by chaos, he always makes the right decisions and that is how I see you."* In return, Will understood how he was seen by the Alpha when Robert accepted the title by saying *"Thank you, my son."*

They snapped their files on the desk simultaneously. It was a silly game and they both knew it but it was their own brand of silliness. Within the confines of Robert's office it passed as normal behaviour and Will did not give a damn if other people thought them immature. It had diluted the after taste from Krendler's insults still present in Will's mind and lifted the burden of adulthood, which had been dumped on him since the age of thirteen. It was fun, sometimes, being a child again.

"Officer Mark Collins. Cause of death as recorded by the medical examiner was cardiomyopathy. Mrs Gilbert, who kindly acted as my agent, searched through the archives and found not only did Officer Collins die relatively young, so did his father and grandfather. It would appear Collins may have inherited heart disease."

"Didn't he realise?" Will asked surprised.

"When Mark Collins joined the police force, medicals were not as stringent, especially in a small town and if outwardly he seemed healthy there would be no need to dig deeper. Mrs Gilbert found a glowing obituary in the local newspaper written by its sub editor, a friend of Collins and she tracked the man down. He described Collins as having a *live now pay later* approach to life. The heart condition Collins was harbouring would probably have been exasperated by his lifestyle. Excessive wining, dining and canoodling would not have been recommended by any medical practioner."

"He was the architect of his own demise." Will said.

"Exactly." Robert's eyes shined. "There's more, William"

Will hated dramatic pregnant pauses especially as Robert had the look of a cat that had gorged on cream. "Aw, come on." Will whined. "You're dying to tell me."

"Two police officers were first at the scene after Mary Ellen Morten's vehicle crashed. One was Mark Collins whose death was unfortunate but explainable and the other was an officer named Clayton Flynn. According to Carl Craven, Officer Flynn was supposed to have vanished into the wind. In fact, Flynn resigned from the police department, travelled the country for a while then married and moved to Fort Lauderdale. He formed his own private security company which by all accounts is very successful."

"How difficult was it to get this information?" Will asked.

"Not difficult at all." Robert replied. "Mrs Gilbert visited the local police headquarters and they were very forthcoming about Flynn's whereabouts. Naturally she independently verified the facts "

"Why would Craven put this information out there knowing he could be shot down in flames?" Will rubbed the back of his neck with his hand.

"Why indeed?" Robert shrugged. "Craven specialised in mysteries, in particular, unsolved murders. Some were historic, others more recent. I looked at his work in detail and he was a fine investigative journalist. Yes, he delved into the world of urban legends but those articles had a light-hearted ring to them."

Will opened the file on the desk and skimmed over the reports seconded by Zeller and Crawford. "Mike Symons, retired homicide detective with the Denver police department. Asked by Senator Whittaker to investigate the death of Mary Ellen Morten. Two months after he finished working for Whittaker, he was found dead in his garage. Head shot, point blank range."

Will took the medical examiner's report and handed it to Robert. "Mike Symons was a dead man walking. Inoperable brain tumour. At the time of his diagnosis he had been given less than a year to live." Will waited, giving Robert time to digest the information. "Symons was awash with commendations for bravery. Given his diagnosis, a man like that would want to go out fighting. If confronted, he would have fought back, he had nothing to lose. Craven said Symons was murdered and that was the route Denver homicide originally took. He was one of their own; if he had been murdered the cops would never have given up. After the initial flurry, they went from full out investigating to zero effort. The angle of the shot and position of his body, there was no assailant."

"You're suggesting he chose his own ending." After Will nodded an affirmation Robert continued talking. "William, I acquired a contact within the Secret Service. He told me when the committee sat, it was decided it would be under the protection of northern security forces as well as the south. A week before she testified, two agents were assigned to protect Mary Ellen Morten. To quote my contact, Mary Ellen Morten was given a security detail as there had been instances when she was found to be tired and emotional."

Robert saw the blank expression on Will's face. "It's a euphemism, William, once commonly used to describe a person who was under the influence of alcohol. They were not protecting her from assassins, they were ensuring she stayed sober."

"Craven wasn't fooled by conspiracies." The Omega pondered over the implications of Robert's discoveries and could see a picture emerging. "Whatever he was investigating was one level deeper. We need to speak to Whittaker. I don't like to ask but.....?"

"You don't approach the likes of Evan Whittaker by walking up the drive and knocking on the door." Robert interrupted. "I will talk to Donald. I believe a phone call from the President of the United States will open the gates."

Sensing their investigation was about to play out in the real world, Will became apprehensive. The novelty of exposing Craven's fabrications slowly waned and a sickening dread began to steal over the Omega instead.

"Good." Will said with false bravado. "We got on this train to see how far it would take us. Evan Whittaker is the end of the line."

Chapter 11

Having agreed to Robert's suggestion that they suspend their quest until the meeting with Whittaker had taken place, Will slipped from being a special consultant to stay at home Omega when the children arrived back from school. Andrius and his grandfather withdrew to the ever-expanding train set which threatened to take over the whole basement area, while Will unwound spending time drawing with the twins. Still analysing the causes behind his outburst the previous evening, it had slowly dawned on the Omega that Hannibal had been charged with excitement when they physically fought. He had worn the predatory look Will sometimes glimpsed before they fucked. The irony wasn't lost on him. Acting contrary to normal Omegan behaviour by discharging his anger at his Alpha and trampling over protocol, he had drawn Hannibal closer.

Will fired off the text to Abel when he went to fetch the girls their milk.

I need your expertise. ASAP.

Barely twenty minutes passed before he receive a reply from sender unknown.

Seven thirty at the gates.

Will smiled to himself as he deleted the message, wondering how many burner phones Abel had secreted around the Sanctuary, then busied himself with his duties. Allowing extra time with the children while preparing them for bed, he later sat listening to Hannibal describe his frustration with a new client whose vagaries concerning a renovation pushed the Alpha to the limits of his patience. Will had conjured up a variety of plausible reasons for Abel's evening visit but when Hannibal decided he needed a few laps in the pool, Will filed them away for future use. The timing was fortunate, with minutes before Gideon's arrival, Will retreated to the bedroom and retrieved a small square of folded paper from his dresser then scurried to his rendezvous.

Abel Gideon appeared bemused standing roadside at the closed security gates. Wearing a grey tracksuit, baseball hat and sunglasses, he reminded Will of the tourists he had seen as a child during his visits to Florida. The Omega's right hand passed through the gap in the bar as if to greet a friend in the long established fashion and he palmed the piece of paper into Abel's waiting grasp. The Omega had been surprised how few folds it had taken before the A4 sheet that contained all aspects of Jonathan Jerome's life became a solid block.

"I need transaction activity over the last year." Will whispered excitedly. "Bank cards, credit cards."

The Beta slipped the paper into his pocket as Will continued. "I'm working with Jack Crawford so be careful."

"I am sure the head of the BAU would excuse any transgression if it helped serve justice." Abel replied in the same hushed tone. "Besides any attempts to trace the source would lead to a rather popular internet café in Kurdistan."

Will had no confidence in Abel's assessment of Crawford. "I need it by Sunday morning."

"Your wish is my command." Abel inspected the iron bars separating them. "These always bring back the pleasant memories of my stay at the BSHCI."

Looking uncomfortable Abel carried on speaking. "I am afraid circumstances dictate a favour for a favour."

"Okay?" Will replied intrigued by the uncharacteristic request.

"Frederick's heart eyes and deep sighs whenever he spies the sainted Barbara have become my own particular brand of torment. Taking it upon myself to nudge them closer, my efforts at matchmaking appear to have gone strangely wrong. I endeavoured to discover whether the recipient of Frederick's desire harboured feelings of a romantic nature toward him. Unfortunately, my attempts appear to have inadvertently given the lady in question the impression it is I who is keen on her. There now is a noticeable frost in the air within the walls of the Sanctuary. Mrs Komeda skedaddles when she sees me and Frederick has taken to emiting hissing sounds whenever I enter a room."

Exasperated Will rolled his eyes. "That'll teach you. You shouldn't go sticking your beak into other people's relationships."

"Had I realised my beneficent actions would create a climate of complexity then said beak would have been harnessed."

"How can I make it right?" The Omega asked.

"Reset the balance. If she leaves her position at the Sanctuary under these circumstances Frederick will be unbearable. The hallways will echo to the sounds of inconsolable wailing."

"Okay, okay, I get your point. Give me her schedule and I'll try to accidentally bump into her next week." Will looked smug. "You'll owe me big time if I pull this off."

"I will put a star on your good behaviour chart. Frederick still has it in his office pinned to the wall." As Abel turned to leave he remarked. "You've changed. The FBI has had influence. You are positively bubbling with eagerness."

"I haven't changed, Abel." Will said suddenly defensive. "I'm still the same person."

"For now." Gideon called out as he walked away.

During the run up to the evening of the auction, Will kept his mind occupied only occasionally indulging in his fantasies. Having viewed the guest list on Tattle Society and noting the names of the women who were going to be present, he mentally ticked off the ones Holly had denounced as cock hungry floozies. Will knew he had only himself to blame for his dilemma. Constantly finding excuses not to attend high society functions had forced Hannibal to go alone. The Omega was sharply aware if he did not break free from his insecurities, his deep-rooted fear Hannibal would find someone else could become a self-

fulfilling prophecy. As he lay on the bed listening to his Alpha hum out a tune as he prepared for his night out, Will bitterly regretted turning down the invitation to attend the event.

Will loved the way Hannibal moved. Fresh out of the shower with just a towel wrapped around his middle, the Alpha walked into the bedroom with a controlled and confident stride. His vanity insisted he inspected every article of clothing making sure they were in perfect condition before they graced his body. Brushing off imaginary threads from the perfectly tailored suit that showed off his muscled figure, the Alpha twisted stylishly to check his rear in the mirror. Hannibal's broad shoulders and long muscular legs exuded strength and sexuality. He looked formidable, like a powerful lion.

"Your butt looks huge in those pants." The Omega swung his legs off the bed and stood up. Hannibal smiled. Will always grounded him when he thought the Alpha was too puffed up.

The Omega imagined a swarm of women crowding around his Alpha, rubbing up against him; imagined his Alpha revelling in their infatuation, being aroused by their touch. The all too familiar despair gnawed away at him as he fretted over the possibilities. Hannibal approached the boy then, slipping his arm around Will's waist, pulled him closer.

As if he had read the Omega's mind, Hannibal murmured. "It is *you* who I love." Warm and loving, the kiss briefly drove out the negative thoughts from Will's mind.

Will trailed him down the stairs to the hallway where Bedelia, wearing a floral lace cocktail dress, was waiting. She looked petite and delicate when standing next to her son. Will knew too well looks could be deceptive and that his Alpha had inherited his fighting spirit from his mother.

"We will not be home late, I promise." Hannibal gave Will one last lingering look before turning.

"Take care." Will called out as he watched them leave, waiting until the door closed before moving. Slouching into the sitting room, he flopped down onto the couch. Grabbing the remote, Will began flipping channels. Searching for anything to distract him from his wild imaginings.

The imperious Letzen brothers threw open the doors of their auction house each year to host a fund raising dinner which only the wealthiest were guaranteed an invitation. For those wishing to be seen as a member of the upper echelon of Baltimore society, it was a high point on the social calendar. For Hannibal it equated to spending an evening with insufferable rich bores who seeped entitlement.

Hannibal radiated masculine magnetism. During his early twenties he had cultivated an aura signalling his status as a thoroughbred, ensuring he was never short of attention from all dynamics and genders. Now in his thirties, his attempt to tone down that quality was met with limited success. His mother by his side, they entered the cavernous salesroom which doubled

as the dining area. Heads were nodded courteously acknowledging their arrival. Bedelia's grace and natural beauty was the antithesis to Hannibal's brooding sexuality. Moving smoothly to their table, Hannibal directed a soft smile to former lovers as he passed by them. He accepted, in this setting, his reputation hinged less on his architectural achievements and more on his hardy sex drive and his artistry in the bedroom. Acting as head of the Lecter family due to the absence of his father, Hannibal anticipated it would not be long before someone would find an excuse to wander over to engage in polite conversation. Aware Lounds habitually manipulated public perception by posting photographs of him standing next to old flames, the Alpha had formulated a strategy to avoid a potential ambush.

Surrounded by trust fund boasters and entrepreneurs as he dined, Hannibal's light-hearted banter counter balanced any self-absorbed droning of a fellow diner. Occasionally taking note of the young couple seated opposite, Hannibal mused by the looks and smiles they gave each other that they were newly paired. The Omega was typical of her dynamic, ducking her head in spite of her Alpha's gentle coaxing whenever the conversation veered in her direction. Hannibal thought it a testament to his mother's charm, that she found a way around the Omega's shyness and soon the young woman was adding to the general chitchat. The meal was unanimously declared superb and even Hannibal with his refined palate was unable to find fault. Once coffee was served, and satisfied he had played his part, the Alpha excused himself from the table.

Hannibal drifted over to the glass display cases at the side of the room and scanned the shelves until he saw the musical trinket chest adorned with hand painted butterflies. Captivated by its vibrant colours, he failed to notice the figure who sidled up beside him. A cultivated voice pulled the Alpha from his reverie.

"You look so damned attractive I am beginning to question my heterosexuality."

Hannibal laughed out loud as he glanced at Antony. "I did not see you when we arrived."

"No, I was late. Got held up in traffic. Is the rest of the family here?"

"Just my mother." Hannibal saw the flicker of disappointment cross the Englishman's face. Antony never spoke about the depth of his feelings for Alana. "Are you bidding?"

"Couple of first editions have caught my eye." Antony followed the other Alpha's gaze. "Ah, butterflies. I take it you have young Willow in mind."

"A birthday present." Hannibal replied. "She is difficult to cater for unlike Gabriella."

"I was quite taken with the lithographs. Some are rather risqué." Antony saw the look. "Oh, I see. You're bidding on them."

"Do not fret, Tony." Hannibal clasped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Once they are displayed on the walls of my Chandler Square home, I will allow you visiting rights."

The auction was divided into two sections. The first half offered a broad spectrum of collectables donated by individuals, the second focused on fine art sourced from private

collections. The bidding commenced in a sedate manner, Hannibal secured the music chest while Bedelia outbid her rival for the vintage art deco jewellery but gradually the auctioneer whipped the room into a frenzy of competiveness. Hannibal pursued the bottle of Hermitage La Chapelle 1961 followed by the exclusive single malt whisky then, buoyed by his successes, raised his bidding paddle several times to compete for the mystery box, contents unknown. Ignoring the *tsk tsk* from his mother, Hannibal was determined to win whatever the price. His heart beat faster as the pace of the bidding increased and when the auctioneer's gavel came down, Hannibal swelled with the instant gratification from his victory.

Hannibal made his way to the restroom during the interval. Recently refurbished the word opulent did not do it justice. With marble floor tiles, gold plated pipe work and gold leaf privacy screens bracketing each urinal, Hannibal pondered how much the actual dollar cost had exceeded the original budget. He was thankful the room was devoid of men he knew. Unlike some of his acquaintances, he never engaged in small talk while holding his cock and urinating. Finishing his ministrations, he made his way back to the salesroom. Hearing the dispute as he passed the staircase he came to a stop. Recognising his mother's voice, he loitered getting a sense of the situation then slowly descended the stairs to the next level. His mother stood near the far wall next to a slender, doe-eyed Omega.

"I don't need any more fine art, Margot. Our walls are covered with it. Fine art at breakfast, fine art at dinner." The voice whined. "I'm so fucking full of it, it's coming out of my anus."

Affronted such coarse language had been used in front of his mother, Hannibal glanced to his left and appraised the speaker. The vulgar Alpha was wearing an equally vulgar suit.

"Is there a problem, mother?" Hannibal asked. Bedelia looked at him and her troubled expression told him everything he needed to know.

The young woman by his mother's side stepped forward. "My brother is of the opinion I shouldn't remain for the final section of the sale. He can get over exuberant if I do not agree with his opinions. Your mother came to my aid."

"Ah, the doctor's baby boy." The man gesticulated wildly as he addressed Bedelia. "Called for the cavalry did we?"

Experience had taught Hannibal to keep out of family squabbles but the desire to wipe the smirk off the other man's face had become hard to resist.

"Mr Verger, I can assure you, Margot will be under our protection and we will return her safely to the hotel." Bedelia stated.

"Since I'm paying for Margot's therapy that technically makes me your employer." Mason's mouth stretched into a grotesque smile. "So I need you shut up and stop interfering."

"I'm interfering because I have a duty of care towards my patient." Bedelia replied tartly. "You are not my patient therefore your needs are not my concern."

"I'm staying, Mason." The Omega said adamantly. "Carlo can wait outside with the car until the auction is over."

The Alpha hesitated, shooting a sideways glance at Hannibal before giving out a short exaggerated burst of laughter. "What Margot wants, Margot gets. Have it your way." His voice adopted a singsong tone as he walked away from them. "Don't forget, dear sister, there are always consequences."

As Mason Verger disappeared from view, Bedelia placed a hand on the younger woman's arm and said softly. "Well done. You've taken the first step."

Bedelia's lengthy conversation with Margot at the end of the auction resulted in Hannibal and his mother arriving home later than promised. As much as Hannibal held some sympathy for the Verger woman, fatigue had set in and their delayed departure had irritated him. Crossing the threshold of DuMaurier House, Hannibal's deep-rooted paternal instinct obliged him to look in on Andrius and the girls. Satisfied they were sleeping safely in their beds, he made his way to his own bedroom.

The Alpha tiptoed into the bathroom, stripped and prepared for bed. Returning to the bedroom, he slipped naked between the sheets. Will's breathing was regular but he could not judge whether the Omega was truly asleep until the figure next to him rolled over. First, an arm draped across his chest then the Omega placed his nose flush against the Alpha's neck and sniffed. Amused by the less than subtle actions, Hannibal's chest shook with suppressed laughter.

"Will, you are checking to see if I have been scented." Immediately Will began to move away but Hannibal caught hold of him and whispered. "Stay. I need you close."

There was a moment of stillness before Will manoeuvred out of his grasp and out of the bed, removing his nightwear, he slid back against the Alpha. Hannibal felt the cool softness of bare skin as his hand moved slowly down the boy's back. He inhaled the Omega's comforting scent and began to emotionally untangle, wondering if this was how Omegas felt when being gentled.

"If invited next year, I will not attend unless you are there." The words flowed straight from Hannibal's heart. "Tonight, I felt incomplete without you by my side."

Chapter 12

Will was on a high from the moment he opened his eyes and recalled Hannibal's words from the night before. The Alpha hadn't spoken phony sentiments as a prelude to sexual contact. His only expectation had been to drift into sleep with his arms wrapped around the Omega.

The children behaved perfectly during breakfast knowing they were going out for the day. While Bedelia tweaked the flower arrangements in the Ginkgo vases, Alana volunteered to help the girls get ready. Keen to return to the tennis club, Andrius allowed Hannibal to administer to him minus the usual complaints. Although the boy insisted he could wash himself, the end result was usually no more than a lick and a promise.

Swathed in guilt, Will took longer than necessary to prepare Tomas. The regret from agreeing to leave the baby at home still clung to him. Yet with high temperatures predicted for the afternoon, deep down Will knew it was the sensible thing to do. Convinced the infant was giving him an icy stare, the Omega planted small kisses on the baby's tummy but was disappointed by the muted response.

"Oh, come on, Tomas, you know I love you. You'll get cranky being out all day in this heat." Will first pleaded then cajoled. "Besides, stayin' home means you get Auntie Alana all to yourself."

Making his happy sound, Tomas waved his arms as he drummed his tiny feet against the changing pad and Will gave a deep sigh of relief interpreting the actions as a sign of forgiveness.

Marginally behind schedule, Will made it back down the stairs in time to see the girls skipping along the hallway behind their aunt. Willow's curls bounced with every step. Gabriella, her hair pulled back, turned to show her Papa the blue ribbon bow that secured her ponytail.

"Auntie Lana made it." Ella said proudly and in return, to show his approval, Will gave out a *" Wow "* . The Omega wasn't surprised to see both the girls wearing matching dark violet jeggins and black tee shirts emblazoned with a cat motif on the front. He sometimes wondered whether they deliberately chose to wear identical outfits to compensate for being fraternal twins.

"Go kiss your grandparents goodbye." Will instructed and waited until the twins disappeared into the sitting room. "Are you sure about Tomas? I feel like I'm taking advantage."

"Of course I'm sure. I love spending time with him." Alana gave him a reassuring smile. "Besides Tomas will be a great excuse to stay out of father's way. You know father, he's bound to find an eligible bachelor among his visitors."

As Alana rolled her eyes, Will caught the sadness she tried hard to disguise. "Are you okay? You seem a little quiet nowadays."

"I'm fine. Everything is great." Alana expertly shut down the conversation by adding enthusiastically. "Go. Have some fun."

Will's relationship with Alana had been slow to develop but after the girls' dramatic arrival, she had given him around the clock support. Finally able to read her, he knew better than to back her into a corner.

"Any problems call me." Will kissed her on the cheek then threw out a lifeline. "I'm a good listener, Alana, if you need to talk."

Will ambled over to the bag deposited near the front door. Unzipping the top, he did a quick inventory of the contents. Considered an essential tool-kit, it contained everything needed to ensure day tripping with the children was trouble free. He heard them as they descended the stairs and turned to address both father and son.

"Are you ready? The girls are gonna get whiny soon."

"Once Andrius has said his goodbyes, we will leave." Hannibal patted his son's shoulder and the little boy gave his father a warm smile before hurrying away. "Andrius said this coming week of schooling is the last before the summer break."

"Damn." Will exclaimed. "My mind's been elsewhere. Thought we had two weeks to go."

"I doubt it will make much difference to the current arrangement. I am confident I can find plenty of quiet activities to amuse them while I work."

"Trying to work from home and look after four kids. You have no idea of the size of the storm that's heading your way." Will laughed derisively. "They'll run you ragged, Mister Alpha."

"You doubt my competence?" Hannibal, his eyes burning with mischief, grabbed his young husband, pulling him close. "Such disrespect, Omega, deserves punishment."

Will opened his mouth to protest but Hannibal surprised him with an unhurried, hungry kiss. Will moved his hands freely over the Alpha's shirt, feeling the hard muscles of the Alpha's biceps and back. Holding tightly, Will melted, only aware of teeth gently tugging at his lips until a small voice cried out impatiently *"Daddy, we're waiting."* Hannibal slowly pulled away and Will let out a disappointed groan, knowing their private moment was over.

The Omega couldn't suppress the wry smile, finding it amusing how Hannibal maintained good posture even while driving. He glanced downward and was transfixed by the Alpha's strong, graceful hand manipulating the gear stick. The hand that frequently edged between his thighs and stroked his sensitive skin. The rush of pleasure overcame him and when his body began to react, he tried to break his train of thought.

"I wonder if the harem will show up?"

"Do not let their childish antics bother you." The Alpha casually replied. "They are no threat to you, Will."

"I let my stupidity win last time." Will's hand rose to his neck and his fingertips lightly skimmed the platinum chain Hannibal had brought back from Dubai. "It won't happen again, I feel more in control now."

"Learn to pick your battles wisely and only fight for what matters most." The Alpha said with conviction. "Learn to avoid petty skirmishes. Life is too valuable to waste on meaningless confrontations."

Will formulated his words as they drove between the stone pillars marking the entrance to the club's grounds. "As much as I appreciate the increased show of affection, I want you to know I don't expect you to break with protocol. I won't kick up a fuss if you act cooler towards me in public."

Hannibal glanced at the backseat view mirror and saw the children were focused on their books. "Perhaps you are no longer the only one who finds protocol stifling."

"You said protocol helped maintain an orderly society." Will scoffed.

"The world is evolving and attitudes are changing. Those who define themselves as Baltimore's polite society are slowly suffocating under the weight of traditional restrictions."

"What's brought this on?"

"Becoming a father has affected the way I think."

"Maybe you should work with Frederick, stand shoulder to shoulder fighting the oppressor."

"Work with Frederick? I doubt if either of us would survive the experience." Hannibal smiled. "However, I will listen to Frederick and those of a similar mind. Broadening my outlook will help plan for our future."

Will was ahead of the game by the time he saw the three female Omegas waiting by the tennis court. Greeting them, he made sure the expensive symbol of ownership around his neck was clearly visible. When the women responded to the jewellery with looks of capitulation, Will smiled, confident his message had been received and understood. Will was aware the twins were at the age when boredom could easily set in and unlike Andrius, the novelty of watching two men hit a ball over a net gradually wore off. The pond was just visible from the seating area and the sound of squawking birds, which occasionally drifted their way, captured the attention of the girls. Will gauged the birds would be enough of a distraction to keep his girls happy and the walk short enough for them to manage comfortably. Leaving Andrius behind, Ella and Willow excitedly pulled Will along to their

destination and were soon laughing at the antics of the geese that had set up home on the far side of the water. Having seen the goslings Will would not let them venture too close, knowing just like Omegas, geese would go on the offensive to protect their young.

His plans for a quick visit were hampered when people stopped to make small talk. He often wondered why people thought it safe to attempt to socialise with complete strangers in an isolated area. Just because they were accompanied by small children or even a dog didn't necessarily make them sane. He had read enough FBI reports to know better.

Their inquisitive minds sated and keen to return to their brother and tell him about their adventure, Willow and Ella ran ahead, arms outstretched, pretending to be birds. Through the cluster of trees he observed her, dressed in dark clothing, standing motionless like a statue near the tennis court. Will found he could not move, puzzled by a feeling of familiarity and unnerved by her unearthly stillness. Suddenly she turned her head sharply to look in his direction and Will suspected the woman had either sensed him or smelt him. Her dipped baseball cap and large sunglasses obscured three quarters of her face and although his could not see her eyes, he could feel the intensity of her stare. His logic told him his rising panic was irrational but the icy shiver slithering its way down his spine compelled him to hurry the girls back to their father.

It was Hannibal's decision to make the detour before heading home. Will was unsure whether his uneasiness showed but was thankful that they did not stay at the club longer than necessary. The Omega market was at its busiest on a Saturday. Adjacent to the parking lot, it had been re-established after the rejuvenation of Baltimore's Omega sector. The sound of the vendors breaking into song as potential customers neared their booths was part of its tradition. Usually accompanying Bedelia, Will revelled in these visits and overtime had established a rapport with many of the traders. The atmosphere gave him, a sense of belonging and triggered happy memories of his childhood. Will stopped by the stall run by an elderly Omega and the girls who were either side of him released their tight grip on his hands. Recognising Will as a regular customer, the woman behind the booth fussed over him. Taking a long hard look at Hannibal stationed behind his Omega, she raised one eyebrow and asked.

"Yours?"

"We're married." Will smiled coyly.

"When you get tired of him, sweetheart, you can throw him my way." She chortled.

Choosing the jumbo crab cake with cucumber salad, Will giggled as the woman puckered her lips and made loud smacking sounds at the Alpha as they walked away. Hannibal purchased fish from a vendor who claimed it had just jumped from the sea then was lured to the coffee seller whose song was in praise of organic beans. The children, who somehow had persuaded their father to allow them to order pizzas later, chewed contentedly on their soft pretzels. As they left the crowd behind them and made their way to the parking lot, Will gave a backward glance and thought of his mother.

He heard the distinctive tone as he opened the car door. Taking his cell from his shirt pocket, Will stared at the screen. Abel's text message read ***Mission Accomplished.***
His heart pumping from the realisation he could be the one to crack the Jerome case, Will decided he couldn't wait for the information and tapped out a reply. Hannibal agreed when Will asked if they could call in at the Sanctuary on the way back home. The Omega did not offer an explanation for his request and the Alpha did not press for one. Quiet during the journey, Will's mind filled with scenarios, each ending in Jerome's arrest.

As the car came to a stop in the Sanctuary's parking area, Will could see Abel positioned near the flower borders, pruning the roses. Spurred on by a sense of urgency, Will sprinted from the car only slowing when he was a few steps away from his goal. Abel reached for the envelope tucked into his waistband and handed it to the Omega.

"Burn after reading." The Beta instructed.

Will nodded as he folded the thick wad in half and slid into the back pocket of his jeans.

"I would like to remind you of the old adage before you scurry off to do whatever it is you have to do to satisfy your cravings." Abel said with a twitch of a smile. "A favour begets a favour."

The Omega smiled broadly, he sometimes forgot Abel could see right through him. "I won't go back on our deal, Abel, you're family." Will turned and raced back to the car.

It took time for the children to settle down when they returned home. Full of chatter about their day out, they made Alana their captive audience, standing directly in front of her as she sat on the couch. Once their supply of new information dwindled and the girls got tired of imitating the birds, they set off in search of their grandmother. Hearing the small cry from the pop-up bassinette, Will walked over and scooped up the infant. He could smell his son's familiar musk, a mixture of honeysuckle, vanilla and baby powder.

"Where's father?" Hannibal asked.

"He grabbed a bottle of wine and some leftovers from the kitchen then locked himself in his office."

"Were there problems at the meeting?"

"Everything seemed amicable. You know these politician types, Han, they never know when to shut up. Mother said father is all talked out, needs time to unwind." Alana rose from the couch. "Now if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I am going out to party with my friends so don't expect me back before dawn."

The fruits of Abel's hacking burned a hole in Will's pocket but he waited patiently until Alana was out of sight. Adopting a nonchalant approach, Will threw a glance at the Alpha.

"I need to check something out. It's a lead on a case. It shouldn't take too long."

"Has Abel Gideon supplied this lead?" Caught out by Hannibal's directness, Will's face reddened.

"Yeah, he helped me out." Will kept his eyes on Tomas, stroking the baby under the chin. "It's the Jerome case, the one I told you about. Two Omega girls missing presumed dead. I think I'll be able to locate the remains of Macey Wagner."

"Did Crawford sanction this?" Will heard the underlying anger in Hannibal's voice.

Will shook his head and laughed nervously. "No, no Jack wouldn't sanction anything that circumvented the rules."

"Jack Crawford is no fool. He is aware Abel Gideon used his skills to obtain information about Tobias Budge. If he discovers Gideon has helped you, you could lose his trust."

"Then I'll blindside him. I'll be very careful how I write my report." Will shot back.

"Jack Crawford did not become head of the BAU by chance. He rose through the ranks by proving how good he is at his job." Hannibal snapped back. "Being dismissive of his intelligence, Will, shows arrogance."

"Jonathan Jerome will kill again and I'll have that on my conscience if I stand back and do nothing." Will stared defiantly at the Alpha. "I don't want another girl to die, Han, not on my watch. As arrogant as it may sound, I can do things others can't. Jack knows it too. That's why he uses me."

Will held his breath as the Alpha studied his face, only exhaling when Hannibal carefully extracted Tomas from his arms. "Use my office then the children will not attempt to distract you. They know it is out of bounds"

Will smiled as Hannibal reached out and caressed the side of his face with his fingers. "I will give you one piece of advice, Will and if you are sensible you will adhere to it. Learn to walk before you attempt to run."

Chapter 13

Will didn't need to get into Jonathan Jerome's mind to find the answers. The trail left by his credit card charges was the Missouri wide. So blatantly obvious even a trainee could see it or so Will hoped. Jack had told him hubris was the serial killer's enemy. The longer the killing spree, the greater their belief they would never got caught. Convinced they were omnipotent, they grew sloppy. Jonathan Jerome oozed hubris and was sloppy from the start.

Will re-read the statement given by Jerome's grandparents. *"Jonathan hasn't a bad bone in his body ..... a warm, loving boy ..... misunderstood ..... wouldn't hurt a fly."* Relatives of serial killers seldom saw the monster in their midst and this couple were no exception. The detective who had investigated had been thorough. Mr and Mrs maternal grandparents resided on the outskirts of Lafayette, Indiana in a gated retirement complex. Their beloved grandson visited every six weeks to mow their lawn, eat wholesome meals and do other mundane things killers did when not killing.

Focusing on the map of Indiana splashed across the curved screen of Hannibal's all in one, Will zoomed in on the storage facilities around the Lafayette area. The breaks in Jerome's pattern had occurred around the day Macey had been born, the day she died and Valentine's Day. Instead of driving straight back to Chicago after visiting the elders, he would detour to a high end liquor store. After spending a shit-load of money *"Champagne, Will thought, or fancy cocktail mixes"* he would book a one night stay at a nearby motel. Next day, he would fill his tank at a local gas station then slither back under his stone.

"You walk from the motel to where you keep Macey. Or maybe get a cab to drop you nearby. You won't drive cause you're gonna drink. Can't afford to be stopped by the cops. You arrive after sundown cause nobody should be around and if they are, they're up to no good."

Scrolling down the entries at the side of the screen, Will focused on the places which met his criteria. Only one had twenty-four seven availability and coded gate access. Will visualised Jerome standing at the gates punching in the number. Walking casually to his unit, he would put the key in the lock and turn. The roll-up shutter was raised enough for him to swoop under then crouching down, he'd turn on the battery operated lamp placed on the floor. Securing the shutter and adjusting to the soft light, he would smirk. In the corner amongst the broken fuels pumps and worn tyres, stood the shiny oil barrel in which Macey Wagner was sealed.

She's trapped in that god-forsaken place. Loneliness overwhelmed Will. *She wants her mom.* He felt like weeping. He was back with Hobbs, he was that terrified young boy, sobbing in the dark.

"Fuck you both." Slapping his hand down hard on the desk, Will cursed Hobbs and Jerome. The stinging sensation refocused his mind and he rummaged through the paperwork on the desk. Finding the rough notes of the lead detective, he slumped back in the chair and read. He consumed the man's observations, fed on his cop's instinct and when satisfied he could incorporate Abel's offering into this mix, he furiously typed out the report.

By the time Will joined them, the children had eaten their pizzas and were dressed for bed. He could see they were fighting to keep their eyes open and ushered them upstairs. Tucked up in their beds, there were no pleadings for a story. Each one had quickly drifted into sleep once their heads were on their pillows. Dogged by a bizarre sense of disappointment, Will headed for the kitchen. He accepted the children were tired but the smiles of wonderment given when he read to them had become vital to his well-being. Grabbing the bottle of white wine from inside the fridge door, he filled the large glass. It was more than he could sensibly handle but its numbing effect would blank out the demons.

Hannibal sat at the far end of the couch, a cognac glass in his hand, skimming through the journal balanced on his lap. His failure to acknowledge the Omega when he walked into the room placed Will on alert. "Father spoke to me, obviously seeking my understanding. Whittaker has agreed to meet with you and father tomorrow at noon. The meeting will take place at father's club. Uncle Donald is supplying one of his men to escort you."

Instead of whooping for joy at the news, Will mumbled a one-word apology as he sat down on the couch.

"You did not have to say sorry, Will, I am not angry with you. Father's reaction was one of excitement and for that reason alone I did not voice objections. Lately he has felt redundant but working with you have given him a sense of purpose and lifted his spirits." Hannibal sipped his brandy then returned to the article he was halfway through reading, signalling the matter was resolved and no further discussion was required.

Light-headed from having demolished a third of the wine, Will placed a steadying hand down on the couch. Shuffling sideways in increments, he studied the Alpha's face for visible signs. When he saw the mouth twitching into a smile, the shoulders shaking from supressed laughter, Will speeded up the process until they were side by side. Lifting his arm and draping it around his Omega's shoulders, Hannibal planted a kiss on the top of his head. Will leaned into his husband and absorbed his strength.

Lying across the Alpha, nose wedged in the crook of Hannibal's neck, Will low purred as a thumb stroked the cheek of his ass. He didn't want to leave the bed but was mindful if he failed to keep the appointment, his father-in-law could lose face. Breakfast was a relaxed affair and over quickly, choosing the right outfit was torturous and took too long. Although Robert's club did not have a dress code and most members wore casual smart on Sundays, the Omega had trouble perfecting the right look. Plumping for black jeans, blue shirt and orphaned suit jacket, he received approval from Hannibal who sat on the bed, enjoying the show. Will finally found the recording device after rummaging through all the drawers of his dresser. Designed to be mistaken for a cigarette light, he had used it to monitor Willow during her silent days. Hannibal looked baffled when the Omega slipped it into his pocket.

"It's my safety net." Will explained. "In case Whittaker changes his story."

Evan Whittaker had a shock of white hair and the mental energy of a man half his age. He and Robert had never met but the two old political warhorses spoke the same language and endorsed the same democratic ideas. As they bonded over the current state of the world's economy, Will was glad the club's private room had views across the harbour. Whittaker remained immobile when Will rolled out the facts behind the FBI investigation. Starting with Craven's murder Will finished with his own version of the deaths Morten and Symons. When the former Senator finally spoke, Will listened intently.

"Mary Ellen dedicated much of her life to helping others but her guilt over inadvertently enabling traffickers dragged her into the depths of depression. She wasn't a full-blown alcoholic but by her own admission, there were weekends when, to escape reality, she would crawl into the bottle. When it came to giving evidence before the committee, she asked for help in order to stay on track. I arranged a security detail to watch over her. Her death was always a tragedy waiting to happen. As for Mike Symons, working for me was his last hurrah. He knew what was coming but wanted to chose the when and the how."

"And the private detective who disappeared?" Will was warming to Whittaker's straight talking.

"The Morten family would not accept the official account of Mary's death so I hired Patterson Ayres. As strange as it may seem, Mary Ellen had confided in me and it seemed disrespectful to disclose things said in private. I did not want to be the one to sully her reputation. After Ayres disappeared and Mike took on the investigation, he discovered Ayres had a lifestyle which didn't match his budget. He was deeply in debt and I was his exit strategy."

"What about Craven's suggestions that traffickers went after the committee?"

"Let me stop you there." Whittaker held up one hand and gave a lazy smile. "There is a misconception regarding the duties of the committee. We weren't a posse. We were there to ascertain how government institutions both north and south allowed this to happen. We touched on private agencies and charities but not individuals. Law enforcement investigated the gangs. The idea that committee members were targeted doesn't hold water."

"Then why did an experienced journalist like Craven pursue the notion? He risked being branded a liar and losing all credibility." Will marvelled how Robert directed the conversation to suit their needs.

"I first met Carl when he was a fledgling reporter on the Omegan Times. He covered the political news and we developed a kind of mutual regard. Eight months after the committee sat a group of northern Senators visited the south to ensure the safeguards were in place. I was one of those Senators. Before he died, Carl came to me wanting information about those visits. He said the State Department had sealed the records. In his mind this refusal equated to a cover up."

"Was there a cover up?" Will asked.

"The Senators were given contingency funds. I ran a tight ship but even I got carried away. Ayres had suggested that Mary Ellen had been murdered and part of me wanted to believe him. He said he needed to protect his informants so I supplied him with money. It's surprising

how your brain can become clogged with fanciful notions. I thought he may have been silenced and seized the opportunity to prove it. My expenditure spiralled out of control."

"You were scammed." Will stated.

"We were filled by a sense of importance. When things didn't go our way, we convinced ourselves we were up against dark forces. It was collective paranoia." Whittaker laughed with embarrassment. "We were paying for information that led nowhere. Sources vanished only to turn up in another state, grifting another Senator."

"I'm surprised the Treasury Department covered up misappropriation of funds." Robert huffed.

"Robert, the world was in the grips of a financial crisis. People were losing their jobs, their homes and we were spending money like there was no tomorrow. If it had got out we had squandered public money, we and those who had sanctioned the visits would have been crucified."

"Forgive me, Evan, but if this was just fraud why did Craven get involved? It was hardly his staple journalistic diet." Robert said.

Whittaker stayed silent as if deliberating his next move. "Carl was adamant he could link one of the Senators to the deaths of three Omegas. He wanted my help. I left politics with my reputation intact and I was not going to risk it on a fool's errand. With no help from official sources or from me, he concocted this huge conspiracy theory. He was chumming the water hoping to attract new contacts. I warned him he didn't know what kind of crazy he was inviting to his door but he wouldn't listen."

Will sat stunned. "Did he give you any specifics about these deaths?"

"I didn't ask and he didn't volunteer. I didn't believe Carl's story but his murder changed everything. I increased my security and even today, I check to see if I'm being followed. Look, I've done the right thing by talking with you but I have a family to consider. From now on leave me out of the equation."

Will walked by Robert's side as they slowly made their way across the parking lot. The emotions he had picked up from Whittaker were still buzzing around his head. He felt sorry for the man. Saddled with knowledge he had not sought, dread was colouring every corner of the former Senator's world. Will understood that universe. He was dreading talking to Crawford in the morning. Robert grabbed Will's arm and slowed them to a halt. Slightly out of breath, he glanced around before speaking.

"When you write your report don't stray beyond your appointed task. Confirm Morten's death was an accident and that there is no peripatetic hit man bumping off the committee. As for the rest, tell Jack Crawford off the record."

"There must be a better way to start to the day other than pissing into a cup." Will emerged from behind the screen and placed the sample container on the counter.

"I could always stick a needle in your arm and take your blood instead." Bowman picked up the indicator strip and dipping it into the solution waited for a few seconds before removing it.

"Next time I'll remember not to urinate just before the test."

"Yep, that's fine. You're suppressant positive." Bowman said as he dropped the strip into the medical waste container. "I hear you've had problems with Krendler?"

"Word travels fast." Bowman had Zeller's direct approach which put Will at ease. At times Will felt he had known Bowman for years.

"What's your take on Krendler?" Bowman asked.

"Paul Krendler is an unprincipled and highly ambitious schemer. He has the ability to push aside the positive in people and emphasise the negative. Makes it easier for him to manipulate others into stabbing his opponents in the back. That's how he keeps his hands clean. He has agenda and that gives him agency within the FBI. He's aiming for the very top."

"Wow, that's impressive. I'm almost afraid to ask but what's your take on me?" Will watched as Bowman tidied his workstation.

"You're passionate about your work but carefully construct a perception that you're here under protest. You hide your expertise behind false modesty. Deep down you would like to be out in the field because you're drawn to excitement and believe you could do the job better than some of the agents you've encountered." Will slowed as he pulled more pieces from the doctor. "Occasionally you hanker after being the main attraction rather than background noise."

"You got me, Will." Bowman laughed good naturedly as he crossed the room.

"Why didn't you try for agent?"

"I like being my own boss." Bowman perched on the edge of his desk, keeping one foot on the ground. "You should lodge an official complaint about Krendler."

Will gave a lazy shrug. "And where would that get me? While they investigate I would have to work from home. In the meantime, in the best interest of the FBI, the hierarchy would circle the wagons until they can find a way to discredit me or pay me off."

"The FBI may be the best law enforcement agency in the world but it cares too much about its reputation which creates a culture of secrecy. They say that's how Jack Crawford gets to

keep his job. Figuratively speaking, he knows where those at the top buried the bodies. They also say Paul Krendler helped put them in the ground. That's what makes him dangerous."

"Well, he's made it clear, for whatever reason, he's out to get me."

"Perhaps he's attracted to you and resents the feeling." Bowman managed to keep a straight face, anticipating the Omega's reaction.

"You're kidding me, right?" Will spluttered.

"It's been scientifically proven that Omegas with duality, even by a hint of a smile, can inadvertently trigger sexual arousal in male Alphas."

"Gee, thanks doc, for that disturbing scientific fact." Will's voice was laced with sarcasm. "I would have preferred it if this was your way of hitting on me."

"Sorry, Will, you're not my type." Bowman shot back with a smile. "I majored in Omegan psychology and though Omegas tend to be shy and demure, studies show blushing and downcast eyes are more likely to be displayed by duals when in the vicinity of a male Alpha. The theory is duals exaggerate submission in order to arouse the dominance in Alphas to see if they are suitable candidate for mating. It's possible you subconsciously displayed those signals to Krendler."

"Are you accusing me of flirting with Krendler?" Will said incredulously.

"I said subconsciously, Will." Bowman grinned.

"Aw great, on top of everything else, I've got Krendler trying to get into my pants." Will groaned as he headed for the door.

"Why did Mrs Meyer say you have a shadow following you?" Bowman asked as Will's hand touched the handle.

Will smiled reassuringly after he turned to face the doctor. "It's no big deal. In the south, Alphas used to pay top dollar to marry a dual. Duals choose their own mate so if forced into marriage they would often bolt at the first opportunity to find their true Alpha. Naturally, the deserted Alpha would demand the return of the dowry plus interest for expenses incurred. Traditionalists began to preach that duals were being lured from their husbands by shadow Alphas who in reality were demons. The stories always ended with either the dual running back to the husband to live happily ever after or staying with the shadow Alpha and being dragged into hell."

"A morality tale concocted to ensure fidelity." Bowman stated. "You're married with children, so why did Mrs Meyer think it was relevant to you?"

"Caught her checking out my neck to see if I was bonded. Guess she's old school. Probably thinks because I'm not bonded I'm still looking for my true Alpha."

"They say a bond cements the relationship. Guarantees the couple stay together." Bowman remarked.

"Don't need to bond." Will replied with certainty. "I found my true Alpha. I stay with Hannibal because I want to."

Saul Katz was halfway through his second black coffee of the morning by the time Will returned to the office. Easing himself into his chair, Will stared at the Alpha. "I know I'm gonna sound weird but I need to ask you something."

"Go ahead." Saul replied.

"Do you find me attractive?"

Saul's face remained expressionless. "Should I?"

"I'm just trying to get an unbiased opinion. I mean, do I flirt and not know it?" Will said flustered, regretting the conversation.

"You're asking if you've flirted with me." Will could hear the smile in Saul's voice.

"Well, have I?"

"I couldn't tell. Haven't know you long enough to make that call." Saul sipped his coffee. "Technically, asking if I find you attractive could be considered flirting."

"Aw, forget it." Will shook his head. "It was just something Doc Bowman said got me thinking."

Saul lowered his cup and sat back in his chair. "Tell me what he said and I'll give you my opinion."

Will explained the best he could his conversation with Bowman. "It's just that it's getting easier being here but sometimes I get a look from an Alpha I can't read. If the Doc is right then I could be giving out signals."

"You're new and people notice the new. Some glance while others give a long hard stare. Don't read too much into it." Saul folded his arms behind his head and eased the kinks out of his neck. "As for Krendler, he's an asshole. Do what we all do. Ignore him."

"Guess you're right. These meetings have got me rattled." Will gathered up the reports strewn across his desk. "Between Krendler and Jorgensen, I don't know which way I'm being pulled. I'm open to advice if you've got any."

"Advice? That's easy." Saul said stone-faced. "Stay away from guys named Paul."

Parking the car in the designated area, Hannibal freed the baby carrier from its restraints. Grabbing the diaper tote bag, he walked the short distance to the checkpoint. Placing the bag on the ground, he retrieved his grade one clearance pass from his jacket pocket and handed it to the guard. The man inspected it carefully even though he knew Hannibal well.

"Sorry, Mr Lecter." The guard said apologetically as he waved the detection wand over the Alpha. "It's the rules."

"No need to apologise." Hannibal replied truthfully. "I am glad you are diligent." Hannibal never objected to the rigid security screening he underwent when visiting Sutcliffe House, The President's safety was paramount and Hannibal willingly accepted the pedantic rituals that helped protect his beloved uncle.

Handing back the pass, the guard signalled to a figure seated inside the security hut and the electronic gates began to slide open. Hannibal placed the carrier onto the rear seat of the waiting golf cart then climbed alongside his son. The driver waited until his passenger confirmed he was ready before starting their journey. Hannibal scanned the surrounding area as they travelled along the driveway to the house. On the surface everything appeared normal. There were no visible signs of the armed guards patrolling the grounds nor signs of the high tech surveillance equipment that watched day and night. Hannibal wondered whether his uncle ever considered losing his right to privacy was too high a price to pay for gaining the Presidency.

Donald stood by the entrance to the house. Tall, straight backed and dressed in a perfectly tailored grey suit, he looked every inch the statesman. As Hannibal disembarked, a wide smiled appeared on the President's face.

"You're keen. When I called to say your packages had arrived, I didn't expect you so early." Donald stated.

"It was easier to drive straight here after taking the children to school rather than return home and leave Tomas with Mrs Foster. Besides, I am need of adult conversation. The children were particularly chatty this morning." Hannibal followed his uncle into the hallway where Matthew was waiting.

Gesturing towards the infant, Donald said. "Entertain the new vice-president while we're gone."

Matthew carefully took the carrier from Hannibal and grasped the bag offered by the Alpha.

"The bag contains all you require should Tomas need changing." Hannibal smiled when Matthew's eyes widened in horror.

"If the worst happens, Matt," Donald patted the young agent affectionately on the shoulder. "hold your breath."

"The boxes are stored in the old music room. The security chief insisted the contents were examined. Seeing the expression on these guys' faces as they unloaded miniature doll houses was priceless." Donald's stride was matched by Hannibal as they crossed the dining room. "I was surprised at the size of the houses. With you directing operations, I was expecting something to rival the White House."

"There are small scale samples, the final product will be significantly larger. It was good of you to store them. No matter how well they are hidden, the children are very adept at finding presents."

"Robert said Gabriella designed her birthday present."

"She has developed a fascination with the 3D software I use for my conceptual design work. She wanted to build her dream home and with my help, it took shape. Will and I agreed materializing the dream would make the perfect gift."

Reaching the door at the far end of the room, Donald opened it and ushered his nephew into the room. Closing the door behind him, Donald said. "I was surprised you allowed Will to work for the FBI."

Hannibal surveyed the doll houses placed on the large square table centre of the room. "I was surprised I allowed Will to work for the FBI, if I am being honest with you. Living with Omegas has influence, I appear to be mellowing."

"What happens if at the end of this posting they ask him to continue?" Donald asked.

Hannibal walked around the table inspecting the items. "By chasing his dream Will is facing reality. His romanticised idea of the FBI family is gradually eroding on the rocks of prejudice. As for the FBI, working for them is not in his best interest. I can see them using Will until he is beyond repair."

"You paint a grim picture."

"Will is driven to save lives. It is part of his nature, almost a compulsion. I believe he would risk his own life to save another."

"I doubt if Will can step back into his former role. You tried and failed to get him involved in fund raising and the business world bores him." Donald said.

Hannibal looked at his uncle. "I have not given up hope in finding an alternative to law enforcement. Father suggested Will should become an advocate and I have slowly come around to the idea. An advocate's role is to aid Omegas in trouble by building a network of contacts that can provide expert help. They seldom get personally involved with their clientele."

"You are aware of the difficulties Will may face when trying to make the right connections." Donald said soberly.

"At the Letzen fundraiser, I was seated opposite an Alpha and his Omega. They were affectionate towards each other and clearly in love. The couple were late returning from the interval and some at the table took the opportunity to make derogatory remarks about the Omega because she was not bonded. My eyes were opened that night."

"If Will was bonded his status would change to honorary Alpha. He would be treated with respect."

"Bonding is not an option. Bonding would give me the power to enforce obedience."

"Bonding does not necessarily mean subjugation. A good bond is sharing traits." Donald enthused. "It's been described as a blending of souls."

"Then that presents its own set of problems." Hannibal inhaled deeply. "We both know what I am capable of."

Donald countered fiercely. "You were defending your mother from a mad man."

"If I was just defending then why did you intervene? You told me afterwards you feared I was going to kill the man even though he was incapacitated."

"What happened that day has never coloured my idea of who you are, Hannibal. You are not mindlessly aggressive." Donald regained his composure and slipped back into uncle mode. "Yes, you are self assured and mentally strong but you have never gone on the offensive without good reason."

"Will is a chameleon. When in the company of others not only does he adopt their speech patterns and mannerisms but also aspects of their personality. At first, I believed his actions were intentional but I learned, by not having a guide, Will is unable to exert full control over his empathy. There is a side to me that could potentially corrupt him if we bonded."

"Are you afraid he would become like you? Will's an Omega, he couldn't kill in cold blood."

"Have you read the FBI reports concerning Will's abduction? No one was sure whether Will incited Hobbs to kill McGreevy through fear or revenge. I doubt if Will knows the truth and that uncertainty has plagued him." Hannibal moved closer to his uncle and lowered his voice. "After Hobbs died, Will experienced nightmares, reliving the moment Hobbs tried to kill him. He began to believe Hobbs dropped the knife before I shot him. The events that day unfolded so fast I could not confirm or deny that fact."

"As the law stands an Alpha has the right to kill anyone who attacks his Omega. You acted within the law." Donald replied.

"Killing Hobbs was an insignificant moment in my life. I experienced no sleepless nights, no flashbacks and no remorse. I was aware when I confronted Hobbs that if he lived, the risk of him escaping and returning would always hang over us." Hannibal confided in his uncle. "Even if he had surrendered, I would have still pulled the trigger. When I expressed those sentiments to Will, he was conflicted."

"Surely you realised bonding would become an issue when you married Will? In the eyes of Baltimore society an unbonded married Omega is a nobody even if they've been bred."

"Our union was one of convenience." Hannibal said dispassionately. "I agreed to Will bearing my children as part of our contract."

Donald laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. "You're a thoroughbred, Han, and thoroughbreds are extremely competitive. My guess is, within your circle of friends, you were the first to marry and the first to sire an heir. You probably have the largest brood. From the instant you saw that young, vulnerable Omega with the face of an angel, don't try and kid me you didn't fantasize about breeding him."

"When I was younger I bedded the catwalk type. Beautiful narcissists you called them. Strictly physical relationships, no emotional investment." Hannibal spoke freely to the man he trusted. "Confident I could never be entrapped by love's alluring spell, I did not see Will on the horizon."

Handing his reports to Crawford's secretary soon after his arrival at Quantico, Will expected an early call summoning him to Jack's office. As the morning wore on without contact, Will's stomach churned at the prospect of Crawford having guessed he had crossed the legal line. When the call came thirty minutes before the briefing, Will regulated his breathing as he made his way to the Alpha's office.

Sitting behind his desk, Jack motioned to the empty chair opposite, silent until Will was seated. "Whittaker isn't going to backtrack at a later date? Claim he was suffering from a dementia type illness and was confused when he talked to you?"

"Jack, he's a former Senator and a man of his word. A retraction would dent his reputation. He's tired of all the speculation and wants to clear the air. Besides...." Will fumbled in his jacket pocket and pulled out the device. "I recorded the whole interview."

Crawford gave a satisfied nod. Sour faced he picked up the Jerome report and turned the pages. "Suggesting Macey Wagner's body is in storage is one thing. Pin pointing a specific area in Indiana? That's quite a leap, Will."

"I extrapolated data from the interviews Chicago police department had on file. Jerome's grandparents live in Indiana and according to their statements he visited regularly. I matched the dates of the visits with key moments in Macey's life. A facility en route would arouse the least suspicion. They'd be no excursions to the middle of nowhere that couldn't be explained away when challenged. Taking on board his need for privacy and the fact his grandparents live in Lafayette, I found somewhere that suited all his needs within his comfort zone." The long silence that followed his words unnerved the Omega.

"It's hard to discern how much truth there is in the statement you've just made." Will's mouth turned dry as Jack's dark eyes bore into him.

"Hey, Jack," Will scrambled to recover "you're the one who always says I make leaps no one else can explain."

"Looks more like inside information than a leap. How is Abel Gideon?" Will's attempt to explain ended when Crawford boomed. "**Shut your mouth."**

Barely breathing Will waited for Crawford to speak. "What are the chances of this so-called leap coming back to bite us on our asses?"

"None, Jack." Shaken by Crawford's sudden aggression Will's voice quavered. "I give you my word."

"Good, cause if you are wrong, we never had this conversation. I'm not going to be hit by any blow back. Do you understand?"

Humbled the Omega ducked his head. "Yes, Jack."

"Krendler's going to be pissed so I suggest you strap yourself in during the briefing." Crawford rose to his feet. "You're in for one hell of a bumpy ride."

Chapter 14

Jack's wrath was short lived and before they entered the briefing room, he clasped a hand on the Omega's shoulder. Will happily accepted Jack's unspoken forgiveness.

After settling between Zeller and Beverly the Omega watched with growing dread as the briefing room filled. Scanning the room he caught sight of his nemesis. Krendler's eyes had a startling detestation in them as they honed in on the Omega. Averting his gaze, Will studied Jorgensen, who, by contrast, had great plumes of satisfaction wafting from his head. Jack's resume of Will's findings was succinct and instructed to strip the murder board of items related to the committee, two trainees began their task.

Already briefed before the meeting out of professional courtesy, Krendler's well-rehearsed protestations began as soon as the first photo was unpinned from the board. He over elaborated the importance of his minor achievement and insisted the original theory was correct. Will tried to tune out Krendler's tonal rumblings. There was a wordy stiffness to his monologue as he repeatedly put forward the same argument. When he finished, Jack delivered his verdict.

"Every fact you have put forward has been discredited. There are no missing committee members and no assassinations."

"Hey, Saul." Jorgensen called out to Katz who sat directly behind Krendler. "Put your hands in the air so you can catch all the facts going over Krendler's head."

"You can't take the word of a FBI wannabe. Duals are gullible and unreliable." Krendler protested. "I spoke to Assistant Director Ransome. He sees it my way."

"While you were spinning your wheels, Will Graham was hunting down sources." Jack growled out with disdain.

"Ransome agrees we should split the investigation down the middle." Krendler revelled in smug satisfaction. "I'm already dealing with the trafficking, so it's best I take it over."

"Ransome is a has been and you are a never will be." Jorgensen rang out.

Krendler jumped to Ransome's defence using words so cringe inducing Will almost felt embarrassed on Krendler's behalf.

"You should try to hold back on the seasoning." Jorgensen snapped. "You have reached fresh depths of sychophancy."

"Jack, you can't put faith in this report. Duals are unstable." Krendler tried to stare Crawford down. "This type of work breaks Omegas. The psych wards are full of them."

Ignoring the remarks, Jack barked out his orders. "As of today everyone is back on the cold cases. Will, find the Slayer."

"Guess it's true, what they say." Krendler produced a mocking smile. "You don't give a damn about the Omega. Its just an asset."

"I did not hear that." Crawford blasted and Will jumped.

With everyone's attention turned in his direction, humiliation engulfed Will like quicksand and panic choked him. Only when the verbal sniping between Krendler and Jorgensen began, did he finally manage to swallow. Will focused on Jorgensen's performance, the old billy goat was gritty. His flair for the theatrical made him peerless in deflecting insults. Will floated above the snarling and watched the trainees denude the murder board as Jorgensen pummelled his opponent.

"Krendler, there's a side of me expecting you to say something constructive." Jorgensen gave a crisp, bitchy smile. "Then I realise your mind hasn't been burdened by intellect."

Jack, arms folded, waited until the arguing fizzled out before planting himself a few feet in front of Krendler.

"While you were cosying up to Ransome, I talked to Executive Assistant Director Carson." Crawford sucked in the air. "VCAC has taken over the trafficking angle. As from now, you are working for them. Saul, you're still with Graham."

Krendler remained silent as the realisation he had been outsmarted slowly sunk in. Adjusting his stance, Jack presented his back to his antagonist then addressed the room.

"There will be no rivalry between agents, no trying to seek the credit. That is not the Bureau's policy. That is not my policy. We are a team."

Brimming with confidence and exuding power, Jack was conscious of the effect he had on others. He knew if he marched into hell, his agents would follow.

Will reacted as soon as he saw Jack striding out of the briefing room. Attempting to catch up, Will turned his fast walk into a jog. Halfway down the corridor he managed to grab the Alpha by the arm.

"Jack, we need to talk." Will spurted out. "It's important."

Hannibal steered the Bentley into the private parking lot and eased into his designated space. Releasing the carrier from the rear set, he walked into the building that housed H T Lecter and associates. The cries from the baby heralded their arrival. Ardelia, seated behind her desk, looked up and when the Alpha tilted his head in the direction of his office, she swivelled her desk chair around and followed.

"Call Max del Portro and inform him I am personally inspecting the plans for his hacienda style villas. He left me a message indicating that without my direct involvement he may shelve the project." Hannibal said tetchily as Ardelia closed the door behind her. He carefully placed the carrier on his desk. "The summer recess begins next week so my availability may be in doubt."

"I'm about to take my break so unless it's urgent, I'll deal with it later." Ardelia freed the mewling baby from his restraints and positioning him into a cradle hold, gently swayed from side to side. "I'm taking Della out to lunch. Moping about the house all day, she's becoming isolated."

"Has your daughter still not secured employment?" Hannibal picked up the leather blueprint tube by its strap and swung it over his shoulder.

"That girl can't catch a break. She has all the right qualifications but her applications are rejected because she lacks work experience. How can she get work experience if no one will give her a job?" Ardelia shook her head in frustration.

Hannibal saw the opportunity and grabbed it. "She can start working for me from tomorrow. Two days a week at first but with an option for more days when required."

"Hey, boss." Ardelia protested. "I wasn't angling for you..."

Hannibal held up a hand to silence the Omega. "Ferrying Tomas around in the Bentley is not ideal. The law of averages dictated one day I would be stuck in traffic with a fractious baby. Today was that day. I do not wish for an encore."

"What about Will? We Omegas get territorial where our kids are concerned."

"I can easily overcome any objections." The tension in Hannibal's shoulders eased when he noticed the small child, who had wailed like a banshee, was now soundly asleep. "Hopefully."

Jack leaned back into his chair as he listened to Whittaker's voice. Will's eyes flittered over the photos of the Ripper's kills tacked to the wall-mounted corkboard. The grotesque images of mutilated victims called out to him.

"I wondered how bad my day would get. Now I know. Why didn't I hear this earlier?" Jack demanded.

"You scared the hell out of me when you yelled. My mind seized up." Will's face pinked up through embarrassment. "Sudden outbursts still make me wanna run and hide."

Prepping himself mentally in case Crawford told him to man up, Will was taken aback when the Alpha spoke.

"Sorry, I forgot the Omega thing." Jack made it sound like a passing fad affecting everyone rather than an inherent hindrance confined to Omegas. Will took it as a compliment. "May I borrow this?"

As the device disappeared into Crawford's pocket, Will nodded his agreement. "How did you know about Abel?"

"You zoomed in on the grandparents and ignored the alternatives. Jerome regularly visited his parents, his on again off again girlfriend as well as his grandparents. Your report read more like divine intervention than profiling. That's not the way you work, Will." Jack could see the Omega was jittery. Both hands shoved deep into his pockets, he shifted his weight between feet. "After Gideon's involvement in the Budge case, I spoke to the NSA. Got a list of hackers who routinely accessed law enforcement databases. One targeted what some believed were wrongful convictions. After they were hacked, evidence would show up that got those cases re-opened. The name of the hacker was Nomad. Abel Gideon was released from the BSHCI on the grounds that he was not and never had been insane. You could say he was no mad."

Will laughed more to himself. "He thought it was good."

When Crawford allowed himself a chuckle, Will sensed he would be receptive and took the chance. "Jack, what's the beef between Jorgensen and Krendler? I'm standing in no man's land while they're lobbing live grenades over my head."

"Home invasions, mid west, started out as robbery then degenerated into rape and homicide. There were no forensics and no suspects. It was out of his comfort zone but Jorgensen provided a geographic profile. Found two districts that could potentially be the next target. We were working alongside local police and state troopers, so we divided the task force." Jack gave the Omega a world-weary look. "What we did not know, could not know, was the unsubs had increased their firepower. At the end of the day, two agents were dead, two more were knocking on the door. During the internal investigation, Krendler suggested Jorgensen had screwed up. Jorgensen is meticulous, practically OCD. His report sheets proved the accusation was false and he was exonerated."

"Why did Krendler try to smear Jorgensen?"

"Krendler's a pissant. He and Ransome are the cheeks of the same ass. Ransome wanted the assistant directorship and thought Jorgensen was in the frame. They've got each other's back." Jack held out his hand and beckoned with his fingers. "Photos."

Will remained puzzled until Crawford explained. "The kids, you owe me a look."

Will reached inside his jacket and pulled out his phone. He knew this was a ploy to help rinse away the bitter aftertaste of the meeting and he was happy to play along. Standing by the Alpha, he swiped through the images until he found his favourites.

"Andrius Graham Lecter. Everyone says he looks like Hannibal."

Jack nodded as he studied the image of the fair-haired boy with a cheeky smile wearing a black tee shirt and shorts. "Andrius Graham? You named him after your dad?"

"That was Robert. The head of the family always names the boys." Will swiped again. "Tomas. He was named after Robert's brother."

Jack caught the tone. "You don't approve."

"Robert's brother is a womaniser. Seen the way he looks at my mother-in-law. He covets." Will swiped again until the screen showed two little girls standing side by side. "Willow's the one with the curly hair. The Graham family trademark. As for Gabriella, I see my mom in her. She has her long black hair and blue eyes."

Crawford smiled warmly at the Omega. "These two are going to be little heartbreakers when they get older. I take it you chose their names."

"Kind of." Will returned the smile. "When they were born it looked like they weren't going to make it then it just turned around. One of the nurses said they had a guardian angel watching over them. In traditionalist stories Gabriella is the fawn spirit, who protects the new born. Guess part of me believed and it was my way of thanking her. Willow is down to Hannibal. He said she moved her hands in a willowy fashion. It was a good fit. Traditionalists say sleeping in the shade of the willow tree removes all bitterness and resentment from your heart."

"Never knew you followed the church?"

Will shook his head. "That was Grandma Graham, she was strong in her faith."

Jack looked at the Omega. "If you are going to continue working here then you've got to be strong. Be prepared to fight your own corner."

"Guess I'm used to having people around to protect me."

"If you want to survive, you better learn how to come out swinging." Jack sounded like a coach before the big game. "Otherwise they are going to skin you alive."

The children sat around the kitchen island on the high back stools, milk and cookies placed in front of them. Hannibal stood with an apron tied around his waist and for the umpteenth time asked the same question.

"Have you made up your minds?"

Promising to cook the children their favourite meal had been an act of whimsy on Hannibal's part but he intended to keep to the promise he had made over breakfast. Tapping his

fingers against his thigh, he waited patiently. He could hear Mrs Foster quietly chuckling as she wiped down the counter tops.

"I want mac and cheese." Andrius declared then added. "Please, Daddy."

"Macaroni and cheese." Hannibal repeated through gritted teeth then turned to Gabriella.

"I want soup." She chirped.

"You want soup what?"

"I want soup, please Daddy." She smiled sweetly. "Papa's soup."

"Vegetable soup." Hannibal affirmed.

"Yes, Daddy." Ella smiled again. "But no carrots."

"Gabriella, carrots are one of the main ingredients in vegetable soup. They are good for you."

"Papa gets them out for me. Like this." Ella picked up an invisible spoon and made a scooping action.

"Very well, no carrots." Hannibal agreed, having no desire to get into a discussion about the nutritional value of a carrot with a four year old. "Willow?"

Willow dipped her cookie in her milk. "I want cheesy noos noos, please Daddy."

"Noos noos?" Hannibal looked to the other children hoping they would translate.

"Pasta." Mrs Foster called out.

"You want macaroni and cheese."

"No, not mac. Hate mac." Willow rolled her eyes in frustration.

"I like mac. Mac is tasty." Andrius protested.

"Don't like mac." Willow leaned forward and stared straight into her brother's eyes. "Mac is itty bitty wormies."

"Daddy." Andrius whined.

"Willow." Hannibal softly growled a warning and immediately his youngest daughter slumped her head forward.

"Willow likes bow ties." Ella explained.

"Ah, farfalle." Hannibal made the words sound mysterious.

"I think we're out." Mrs Foster called out as she rummaged through the kitchen cabinets. "Groceries won't be delivered until tomorrow."

"Here." She placed two packets of pasta in his hand. "Besides macaroni, that's all we have left."

Hannibal glanced at the items then held one aloft. "Spaghetti. I could make you a Bolognese sauce with extra cheese."

"Don't like 'ghetti." Willow raised her head. "They're big wormies."

"Willow, I do not want to hear you say that word again." Hannibal said sternly to show his displeasure. Staring intently at his daughter, he lifted the tagliatelle in the air, daring her to object. "Willow?"

"Don't like talli. They're squished...." Willow, with a mischievous look in her eyes, silently mouthed the forbidden word.

Hannibal stifled the laugh. This little bundle of curls, who on the surface appeared shy and docile, was the same daughter who would jump out from behind a door to scare him. He treasured her individuality, adored her occasional streak of independence. Assuming his poker face, he played his last card. "Ravioli. Homemade."

A quizzical smile formed on Willow's face and she ventured. "Papa's ravi?"

"Yes, Papa's ravioli."

As Willow beamed, Ella sat up straight, her eyes widening in excitement. "Me, too."

"And me." Andrius chorused.

Mrs Foster held up her hand in a fist with her little finger extended. As she waggled it, she snorted. "That's what they've got you wrapped around."

Will hated playing the waiting game. When the updated toxicology report on the Slayer's victims had failed to materialise an hour and a half after he requested it, he decided to retrieve it in person. Desperate to empty his bladder and with the Omega facility one floor down, Will chose to use the main restroom. Will instantly regretted his decision when he swung the door open. His nose wrinkled in disgust, the stench of concentrated Alpha urine was nearly as bad as decomp. His only compensation was the overwhelming feeling of relief when his stream hit the back of the urinal. Keen to exit and breath normally again, he quickly zipped up his pants and made his way to the wash basin. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see something closing in on him. Turning his head, he saw Krendler and instinctively stepped back.

"You are going to change your report. Tell Crawford you were out of your depth. Tell him Whittaker was drunk, confused, whatever; just tell Crawford you were wrong."

Hit by a gut sinking feeling Will was painfully unsure what to do next. He suddenly felt very small and very afraid. Krendler was taller and stronger.

"I'm not buying what you're selling." Will shook himself out of his torpor. This was no longer about who was right or wrong. It had come down to power and control.

"Wrong answer." Krendler hissed. "You screwed up. That's exactly what you're going to tell Crawford. In fact, I predict that in the next forty eight hours you are going to find a connection between traffickers and Craven's murder."

"Stop beating that damned dead horse." Will's word tumbled over each other. "You heard Jack. It's over. I'm not walking any of it back."

"It isn't over..." Krendler jabbed his index finger hard into Will's chest. ".... until I say it is."

"Jack's not going to put up with any of your shit and neither am I." Will could hear the loud chiming of uncertainty in his voice.

"Your mouth gets rough when you're scared." The man sneered.

Although Krendler appeared comfortable in his own pelt, the Omega knew the chink in his armour. "If you believe in this traffickers shit then Jorgensen's right about you. You are intellectually redundant."

Spun round, Will's head connected with the mirror. His left arm wrenched up behind his back. Shocked by the level of violence, the Omega's whimpering reflex designed to prompt pity in Alphas went into overdrive. Krendler threw out all the vitriol he could summon.

"I don't need a fucking cum dumpster analysing me."

Krendler's tightening grip was unforgiving. Will felt sick when the man's stale breath brushed against his face. "I can think of much better uses for that smart mouth of yours." Krendler slowly whispered.

"Let him go." The disembodied voice was familiar. Will stared into the mirror and saw Saul standing motionless at the end of the block.

"Keep out it, Katz. We're just having a friendly conversation." Krendler shouted.

"Let him go or we'll have a conversation. It won't be friendly."

"Are you going to give me until the count of three?" Before Krendler had even finished talking, Katz strode towards them.

"Someone should have told Hobbs to kill it before it breeds." Krendler taunted as he released his hold and pushed Will away.

Will stumbled past Saul then broke into a run.

Chapter 15

Saul had spent thirty-six days on training courses since joining VCAC. Of those thirty-six at least twenty days concentrated on the conscious and subconscious treatment of Omegas. Commonly known as the deprogramming programmes, the aim of such intense courses was to strip away the myth from the reality and enable agents to look through neutral eyes.

His final test was the FATS hostage simulation and without a pass he would never work undercover. He didn't approach it any differently to the ones he had undergone during his trainee period. He would navigate the building and take out the enemy, judging in a split second who was friend or foe. As he turned the final corner and faced an elderly Omega woman, Saul didn't drop his guard. As she slowly shuffled forwards, she suddenly sprung at him wielding the knife she had hidden beneath her coat. Without pause for thought, Saul fired three shots at her torso area then tapped two more into her head. During debriefing he was asked why he did not try to disarm the Omega. Like all agents, he had been trained to give the standard response. *"My first priority was public safety and securing the hostages and in such situations I have to detach myself from my emotional side. I never forgot my training and did not react viscerally."*

Saul chose to answer in his own blunt way. *"It was my life or hers and when facing an assailant, gender and dynamics go out the window."* He was awarded a pass with distinction.

Finding Will was Saul's priority. First he had subdued the enemy by leaving Krendler sprawled on the washroom floor. Secondly, well versed on an Omega's need for a safe space, he began the search.

Not the type to go racing along corridors calling out someone's name, he texted the Omega as he walked at normal pace to their office. Finding it empty, he began to backtrack to Crawford's office. A few steps away from Jack's domain, Saul received Beverly's message and turned around. He took the elevator down one level then headed towards the briefing room. Ignoring the *authorized personnel only* sign which hung from the handle, he opened the door and stepped inside.

Will sat on the floor next to a tower of neatly stacked chairs. Beverly was beside him, her arm around his shoulders.

"What the hell happened, Saul?" She glared at her cousin. "Will literally ran into me near the washroom. He said Krendler tried to get him to change his report then dragged me here. He's been shaking ever since."

"I caught the tail end." Saul's voice never betrayed his emotions but anger still roiled inside him. "Krendler was being physical. I stepped in."

"Someone's got to report Krendler." Beverly's words sounded more like a plea than a command.

"He's Teflon." Saul squatted down in front of the pair, taking the opportunity to check Will's face for damage. The Omega's eyes were downcast and his face pale.

"We can't stay out of this. Will's not the first Omega he's intimidated."

"You know the score, Beverly." Saul nodded in Will's direction. "It's up to Will to make the complaint."

"We all know why Agent Asswipe chooses newcomers." She looked at Saul with reproach in her eyes. "Report someone on a lower rank, you're rewarded. Report someone above you, you're fired."

Saul did not like the system anymore than his fellow agents.

Will clawed his way out of his sheltering silence. "Hey, I'm good." He began to struggle to his feet, feeling stronger now his shaking had subsided. Saul rose and offered a helping hand.

"Good?" Beverly remarked. "So all that shaking was to fool me into hugging you."

"I'm sorry I dragged you into this." Will breathed in deeply and drew on Beverly's resilience. From his jacket pocket he took out his handkerchief and instinctively wiped clean the cheek touched by Krendler's breath. "That's the last time Krendler's gonna fuck with my mind."

He walked over to the murder board and put on a brave front. "Jack wants me to find the Slayer and that's exactly what I'm going to do." Will closed his eyes and prayed his traitorous Omegan nature didn't come to the fore.

"Will, you're safe." The voice was masculine and concern was clearly audible in its sound. Will's senses tingled *Alpha.* He couldn't wait to press his body against the man, feed off his strength. The fog lifted and he slowly opened his eyes, aware of the comforting hand on his shoulder. Looking up and not seeing Hannibal, he almost slipped as he hurriedly stepped backwards.

"What the fuck is going on?" Zeller demanded as he strode into the briefing room."

Bowman moved away from the Omega and faced Zeller. "Agent Katz called me. She said Will was in a trance like state. When I arrived he was standing in front of the board unresponsive."

"So that gave you the right to gentle him?" Zeller rounded on Beverly. "Why the hell didn't you wait for me instead of calling in Doctor Dreamboat?"

"Hey, don't lay your guilt on me." Beverly placed her hands firmly on her hips. "I called but you didn't pick up. I left a message. You never replied."

"Hey, hey, Zeller, it's my fault." Will called out, his face hot from embarrassment. "I didn't prepare enough. Got lost in the reconstruction. I shouldn't have rushed."

One look at Zeller and Will knew he hadn't understood his explanation. Hadn't fully comprehended that Bowman had acted in a purely professional capacity. Ignoring his brother-in-law, Will marched to the board, his imagination sparked by the images. Will hadn't felt this clear headed in a very long time. Taking down the photograph of Craven, he addressed the only person in the room who could follow his reasoning.

"There are two killers. Jorgensen and Macready were both right but nobody was paying attention. Carl Craven's death was a copycat killing. The other three were the victims of the Slayer."

Beverly remained silent. She had seen this before and knew when to interact.

"The Slayer's first victim was a sex worker. There's no way he would invite an Alpha into his home without his minder on watch. But a Beta, someone in a position of authority, someone he had prior contact with, wouldn't be seen as a threat."

"Like a cop?" Beverly said.

"No, not a cop. Victim one would stay clear of law enforcement. The Slayer works for an organisation that revolves around Omegan welfare. That's how he got them to lower their guard."

"Health workers? Social workers?" Beverly suggested.

Will nodded and began to pace. "The Slayer drugged the victims before killing them, didn't want them to feel pain. He chose these Omegas because they were different to the herd. They stood out."

"One of the first motives suggested for the killings was envy. The Omegas were the primary breadwinners. It's unusual." Beverly said. "Alphas usually earn mega bucks more than their Omegas."

Will stopped walking and looked at Beverly. "It wasn't the Omegas he was targeting, it was their Alphas. He was destroying them financially as well as emotionally." Behind his blue eyes, Beverly could see it clicking into place. "The Slayer is a Beta, late thirties to mid forties. His air of self-importance comes from his job. He has influence, can change people's lives. Suddenly that power is gone, snatched away from him. He's demoted or side lined because of an Alpha. All the repressed hatred he harbours towards that dynamic erupts and he needs an outlet. So he creates the Parkwood Slayer." Will's outpourings slowed. "Adding Craven to the body count skewered the profiling. We need in depth background checks on the Alphas. Work, recreation, somewhere along the way those Aphas walked the same path. Find the connection and you find the Slayer."

"Saul and I will get right on it." Beverly saw the surprised look on her cousin's face. "Hey, I need help. Two heads and all that jazz. We are a team, right?"

"Do I have a say on the matter?" Saul noted Beverly's bemused smile. "I guess not."

Will approached Zeller. "I need you to review the Medical Examiner's reports. There will be differences between the way Craven was killed and the others. They may be subtle but I know you'll find them."

"Sure." Will couldn't read Zeller's expression but he sensed combativeness and it bothered him. "Right after we've talked."

"If you need assistance, my in-tray is pretty light at the moment." Bowman offered.

Zeller began awkwardly. "Lloyd about what I said....."

"That's okay. You were worried about Will." Bowman interjected and gave Zeller a friendly pat on the shoulder. "I'd be concerned if you weren't."

Will waited until the others were clear of the room before speaking.

"Doctor Dreamboat? Your jealousy is showing."

"I get tired of hearing how great Bowman is." Zeller blurted out, momentarily wrong footed. "He isn't the problem, Krendler is."

"Don't tell Hannibal." Will said firmly. "When the time is right, I'll speak to him."

"Don't ask me to lie to my brother, Will."

"I'm not asking you to lie, Zeller. You heard Jack; we keep any problems in house. We wouldn't be having this conversation if I wasn't married to Hannibal. If I was somebody other than your brother's Omega, you'd stay out of it."

The proverbial rock and hard place Will thought as he watched Zeller chew over the words.

"You're family, Will. I can't switch it on and off. Whether you like it or not Krendler and I are now on a collision course."

"I'm not some kid playing at FBI." Will said defensively. "This is what I do. What I want do. When we're at work I'm just your co-worker."

"Okay, I'll leave it down to you to tell Hannibal, so long as we're clear on one thing. We may not be blood related but I am always going to see you as my kid brother." Zeller ruffled the Omega's hair. "And I always defend my brothers."

The children sat around the dining table, remembering to thank their father as he placed their meals in front of them. Their spirits had not dampened when they had been told Papa might be home later than anticipated. Gabriella, who now had taken to impersonating her grandmother, requested sparkling water instead of still. She lifted her tumbler and sipped, pretending she was drinking champagne, much to the amusement of her siblings. Her chatter was as entertaining as it was uplifting when she gave details of the summer break production she and her classmates would be performing.

"I am the dragon's voice." She announced. "Mrs Olyphant says I sing beautifully."

"Are you taking part, Willow?" Hannibal asked as he sat down.

Gabriella replied on her sister's behalf. "She's the dragon's tail."

"Dragon's butt." Andrius snorted out a laugh.

"No, she's not." Gabriella said adamantly.

"Andrius apologise. I will not tolerate rudeness." Hannibal tried to be softer around his daughters as they were easily upset when tempers flared but Andrius needed a stronger hand. Hannibal had seen the first green shoots of Alpha dominance in him.

"Sorry, Willow." Andrius gave her a *not sorry* smirk. Immediately he called out. "Willow's poked her tongue out at me."

Hannibal looked up in time to see the girl spear the ravioli and pop it in her mouth. "C*lever"* thought the Alpha, knowing he had often reminded them not to speak when their mouths were full. Turning to Gabriella, he asked. "Did your sister poke out her tongue?"

Gabriella put down her cutlery and crossed her arms in stubborn loyalty. "I'm not a tell tale."

"Had your sister been innocent you would have told me without hesitation. Your actions have confirmed your brother's story." Hannibal explained kindly.

Filled with guilt, Gabriella looked at her sister who hissed. "Squealer."

Ella turned on her brother. "S'your fault, Andi. You started it."

"You're stinky." Willow glared at the boy.

"Quiet." Hannibal's voice filled the room. "Do not insult your brother, Willow."

"That's Papa's word." Ella protested.

"When people say bad things." Andrius joined in, switching his allegiance to his sisters.

"Papa says sticks and stones." Ella said sagaciously.

"We shouldn't pay no mind to them." Andrius said.

"Cos they're stinky." Willow declared.

Hannibal knew he had no choice but to ask the question. "Do people use bad words when you are with your Papa?"

Hannibal watched as his children shared furtive glances and it tore him apart when each of them nodded. "People who say bad words are uneducated and rude. A better word to describe them is ignorant. Now repeat after me. Ig-nor-ant."

The children followed his instructions and he smiled at them proudly. "From now on think of people who say bad words as ignorant."

"And stinky." A small voice added.

Preparing to admonish his daughter, Willow's naughty girl look disarmed him completely and once he began to laugh, he could not stop.

Will grumbled under his breath when he received the call. Already running late, he didn't want to be detained any longer. He flashed Saul a look.

"Ten minutes after quitting time and Crawford wants to see us."

Side by side, the duo walked briskly to Jack's office. When they entered, Will was surprised to see Bowman and Jorgensen were also present. He and Saul took the vacant chairs when Bowman elected to stay standing. Jorgensen stood gazing out of the window, his cell phone glued to his ear. When he had finished the call, he nodded at Crawford.

"What's so important, Jack?" Will broke the silence.

"Jonathan Jerome was arrested last night outside Fairfax. What began as a routine stop due to a broken tail light became a high-speed chase. When the patrol officers finally pulled him over they found a stun gun, duct tape, latex gloves and a hunting knife in the trunk of the car."

"The rapist's tool kit." Bowman said solemnly.

A steady unease began to engulf the Omega. "Where was he heading, Jack?"

"The car's memory had one destination, the Shenandoah State Park. We received confirmation that Mrs Meyer's two youngest daughters are still living with the church elders somewhere outside Strasburg. We believe Jerome was going after them."

"Fuck." Will's shoulders sagged when he realised he had helped create this situation. He look down at his hands recalling the words of encouragement he had given to Mrs Meyer.

"Will?" The Omega stilled the voices in his head telling him this was his fault and looked up at Crawford. "You and Saul will go to Fairfax tomorrow. This is our best chance of nailing him. This is what you hold onto."

As his mind attempted to wander, Will pulled himself together. He removed his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose.

"We bought some time. The guy whose car Jerome was driving now claims it was stolen." Jorgensen looked at the blank faces staring back at him. "We're trying to stack up the charges. It was implied he could be charged as an accessory if he had loaned Jerome the car."

"Saul get up to speed on Jerome. Jorgensen will help you. I want you to crawl over every inch of that son of a bitch's life. You'll need to know him inside out before you sit down with him. Will, you will observe the interview. If you pick on anything and I mean anything, you'll advise Saul." Crawford ordered. "Doctor Bowman, you'll accompany them as Will's minder."

"Jack, you'll need for Jerome to believe you are sending one of the FBI's finest agents to interview him." Excitement crept into the Omega's voice. "His ego is so bloated he thinks he can convince anyone into believing he is an innocent. He won't be able to resist playing games if he thinks he is up against the best."

"We'll ramp it up, don't worry. I will personally talk to the Chief at Fairfax. Make sure his team is party to the plan. Hell, we'll even lay on a red carpet for your arrival if that will do the job. We'll finalise our strategy in the morning."

"Will." The Omega looked expectantly at Crawford. "Are you sure your Alpha will be okay with this?"

"Sure, Jack." Pink faced Will put his spectacles back on. "Hannibal will understand."

Signalling the meeting was over, Jack picked up his cell phone from his desk. While the others filed their way out of the office, Bowman stayed back.

"What if Will wants to do more than observe?" Bowman looked squarely at the other Alpha.

"If he wants to take a shot at Jerome then let him. Jerome may have made a fool out of the local cops but Will has a way of getting inside your head. Just make sure he doesn't go too deep. I don't want to hear you had to scrape him up off the floor because he had a meltdown."

"Will influenced Mrs Meyer. Omegas are quick to take the blame for any fall out."

"This may be a team sport, doctor, but there is always a leader. Just do your thing and keep him grounded."

"What thing?" Bowman asked.

"Your job." Jack replied sharply. "Remind Will I made him talk to Mrs Meyer. The ultimate responsibility lies at my door. He'll listen to you, doctor."

"You want me to give him plausible deniability."

"I want you to tell him the truth." Crawford stated emphatically. "I am the head of the BAU. The buck stops with me."

The children were asleep by the time Will arrived home. While Hannibal prepared Will's evening meal, the Omega raced upstairs to his bathroom. He turned on the shower and cranked it to high. Discarding his clothes, he quickly washed the day away and dressed in clean clothes. Returning to the kitchen he grabbed the opened bottle of Bulgarian red wine that sat on the counter. Holding it up, he waited until Hannibal nodded his consent before pouring himself a large glass.

"You smell different." Hannibal stated.

Will froze, wondering whether he had failed to remove all traces of Bowman. Hannibal shifted position and in two strides was behind the Omega. Will felt the man up against him, felt whiskers tickle his is neck. *He's checking my scent* thought Will and twisted around until he was face on with the Alpha. Will moved his hands up the Alpha's arms and felt the breadth of the muscular shoulders. Will's gaze reached the rich brown eyes then flickered towards the tempting lips. Hannibal's hands snaked around Will's waist. The kiss was soft and gentle. A sudden hot flare of longing ran through the Omega and his skin tingled as the Alpha's lips caressed his.

"Don't stop." Will said when Hannibal finally pulled away. "I need this."

"You need to eat." Hannibal said. His hand stroked the Omega's chin before he returned to the stove.

Will walked over to the island, glass in hand, and scrapped back a stool. When comfortably perched, he watched the Alpha cook.

"You are not going to like what I'm about to tell you but I want you to hear me out." Will's carefully constructed story tripped off his tongue. He gave his account of the meeting in Jack's office and highlighted the fact that he would be only observing not participating in Jerome's interrogation.

"Am I missing something?" Hannibal's voice was cold. "We had an agreement. No field work."

"Do you want to know what keeps swirling around inside my head? I persuaded Mrs Meyer to co-operate. I put her daughters at risk."

Hannibal turned to look at the Omega. "You are not asking permission. You have already agreed to attend."

"Please don't get angry, Han. I hoped you would be supportive. I wanted to be truthful."

"I am surprised you bothered, Will, when lying has come so easily to you in the past. Why even broach the subject unless, of course, you were afraid I would find out after the event?"

"Don't take the moral high ground. I don't have the monopoly on lying." Will snarled. "You told your parents the table broke because you accidentally tripped and fell." Will had hated the fact his in-laws had been deceived and had avoided their eyes while Hannibal effortlessly told his white lie.

"My parents were concerned about the state of our marriage. They were afraid you would walk away. I had only recently informed them we had resolved our differences. I did not think it advisable to tell them you had punched me in the face."

Will waved a hand to cut him off. "I'm not spoiling for a fight. There is something about the Jerome case I can't shake loose."

"You've made this your personal crusade." Hannibal's voice was level but underneath Will heard a hint of exasperation.

"My crusade? Jonathan Jerome is a predator who destroys lives. If we can't contain him, he is going to evolve. He'll become bigger, stronger and more disciplined. He will head to the Southern States and go undetected because hey, what's another dead Omega girl in the south? He'll get to the stage where instead of hiding bodies in lock ups, he will keep his victims very much alive." Will couldn't contain his anger. "He will lay with them, play with them for days, maybe weeks, until he gets bored. They will go through unspeakable torment before he kills them. He will choose younger and younger victims because they will be easier to control. They will believe if they do everything he asks of them, they'll get to go back to their mommies and daddies. They won't."

Hannibal inhaled deeply before speaking, the images Will's words had conjured up in his head disturbed him. "Jack Crawford has sent you into a very dark place."

"I can't let what happened to me happen to another kid." The weighted memory hung in the air. As the energy slowly drained from his body, Will was hit by the kind of despair that sucked anything positive out of his world. "Please, I don't want to fight. I don't think I can take it. Life at Quantico isn't all that it's cracked up to be. It's not exactly Omega friendly."

Will's eyes looked mournful and Hannibal could see the fatigue in the Omega's face. He sensed, if subjected to the Alpha's ice-cold fury, the Omega would shatter. Surrender never came easy to the Alpha but he had no desire to once again witness the boy descend into a deep trough of depression. Aware he was forcing Will into a position that could push him over the edge, Hannibal accepted his hands were tied. With one deep breath, he jettisoned his anger. Turning off the heat, he placed the spatula across the rim of the saucepan. Wiping his hands on the cloth on the counter, he walked to where the Omega sat.

Will looked into the eyes of the Alpha and saw they were warm with sympathy. He parted his legs to let the Alpha take a step closer then nestled the side of his face against the Alpha's chest. Hannibal held him with one hand and petted his hair with the other, fingers gently combing through the re-emerging curls. Will blinked away the tears. He wanted to sob, tell Hannibal about the bad things that happened to him, watch Hannibal pulverize Krendler into a bloody pile of pulp.

"Are you facing hostility at Quantico?" Hannibal asked, his Alphan instinct on high alert.

"Nothing I can't handle." Will uncoiled hearing the protectiveness in his Alpha's smooth accented tone. "As long as I have you by my side."

Hannibal gave Will a complete run down of his day as he sat opposite the Omega watching him enjoy his meal. Ravenously hungry, Will scraped every morsel from his plate. Emphasising the distress of Tomas while they were stuck in traffic, Hannibal's preamble led to Della's dilemma. Preparing himself mentally to tell the Omega he had employed the young girl, Will jumped in first.

"When does she start working for us?" Will licked the remains of the sauce from his fork.

Startled at Will's perception, Hannibal replied quickly. "Tomorrow."

"Aw, Han, you kill me. You really do." The Omega began to laugh. "Why didn't you tell me straight out you had hired Della?"

Hannibal smiled in return. Hearing Will laugh always pleased him. "I was under the impression Omegas resent help from anyone other than family members. You have previously voiced objections when I suggested you needed help."

"It wasn't a dynamic thing, more a pride thing. I needed to prove to myself I could cope. The kids like Della. Let's give her a chance." Will dabbed his mouth with the napkin. "Omegan solidarity is the first step in the revolution according to Frederick."

Hannibal reached across the island and took Will's hand in his. Studying the Omega's face, he remained silent. Will gave his Alpha a sad smile and squeezed his hand. Needing to shine some light on his situation and admit he could be wrong, he softly said.

"You were right about the FBI. I did create a fantasy world."

Hannibal's heart warmed as he watched Will sleep. Lying next to the Omega made him feel complete. He inhaled Will's tantalising sweet scent, happy it had finally overridden the curious smoky odour that had accompanied the boy home from Quantico. There was a serenity to the boy when he was asleep. Only when the outside world troubled him would he struggle against the arm holding him in place. Hannibal no longer imagined a life married to another. For the main part, he had gained gentle companionship with the Omega except for

those times of the year when an incredible force took hold of the boy, a force that was both unpredictable and irresistible.

Hannibal's mind sometimes drifted back to Will's first heat after the birth of Andrius. He had rented a luxury villa, privacy guaranteed, overlooking the ocean. They had relaxed by the pool and combed the beach where they took in the magnificent sunsets. Standing poolside late one afternoon, Will had suddenly stripped then dived naked into the water. Fascinated by the rise and fall of the pert backside, Hannibal quickly discarded his trunks and followed. A faster and stronger swimmer Hannibal soon chased him down. Wrapping his arms around his Alpha's neck and legs around his waist, the Omega adopted a sweet, sultry tone and begged to be fucked. Shortly afterwards Hannibal had lain on the bed mesmerized as the Omega, face glowing with ecstasy, grinded down on the Alpha. The image had never faded from Hannibal's memory.

Although their relationship was sometimes rocky, Hannibal knew, with absolute certainty, he had never loved anyone the way he loved Will.

Chapter 16

Crawford held the attention of everyone in the room as he laid out their strategy. Co-ordination was central to the plan. By the time Will and the others had arrived at Fairfax police department which operated from the court house, Jerome senior would have been pulled in for questioning by the Fork River homicide detectives.

"There are picket lines outside his factory and local stores are refusing to stock his goods. He has a choice. Give up his son or say goodbye to his business." As for Jerome junior, Crawford made his position clear.

"One of the detectives who interviewed Jonathan Jerome described him as likeable." A brief look of disgust appeared on Jack's face. "He is a parasite who doesn't deserve admiration. From now on we apply maximum pressure. Yank his chain until he doesn't know which way is up. If he walks we will be tailing him twenty-four seven. The smallest infraction of the law and he will be charged. If we can get him into court then our judge will sign off on the warrants."

Jack gave Will one of his looks, the look which told the Omega to remain seated after the meeting ended. When the room finally cleared, Jack rose from his chair and took out his cell phone. Walking around his desk, he parked his backside against its edge.

"Mrs Meyer got in contact." Jack lowered his hand and tilted the cell in Will's direction. Will leaned forward and read the message.

I believed you would catch him and he would no longer have power over me. How could I be so stupid?

Two girls lying on the floor, their bodies twisted and bleeding. The dark image flashed through Will's mind. Taking a deep shaky breath, he focused on Crawford's words.

"If Katz gets nowhere, you can talk to Jerome. If you can handle it. There'll be no shame if you say no." Jack advised. "Remember, I like to win the right way by following the rules."

"Bad guys don't play by the rules, Jack."

"I've seen too many cases flounder because of fuck ups. What I want is what you want." Crawford's face showed no emotion. "Jerome in jail. Preferably on death row."

"I may be a bit crazy, Jack, but I'm no fool. I got swell headed before. Your quick burst of verbal fire scared the strutting right out of me."

Crawford cracked a smile. "You're still green, Will, but don't sell yourself short. I would never have invited you in if I didn't think you would grow into the job."

"Well, whatever happens, Jack, I'm going to look on the bright side." Will placed his hands on the arms of the chair and eased himself upright. "At least the Meyer girls are safe."

Jack waited until the Omega had exited before saying. "For now."

Saul headed their group across the parking area into the Fairfax County Court House and badged his way past the security point. They waited patiently at reception until Detective Kellerman marched across the lobby, his sharp features, reddish brown hair and matching moustache, reminded Will of a fox. Greeting them individually by way of a handshake, he wasn't a man to waste time or words.

"Jerome made bail." Will's heart sank until Kellerman added. "When he heard the Bureau had sent their top man to talk to him, he was cock-a-hoop. Says he wants to do his civic duty. His attorney insisted he needed time with his client before you met."

Saul pointed to his colleagues. "They need to monitor the proceedings."

Kellerman was all business, no joking around. "Sure. If you gentlemen care to follow me, I'll show you your base."

The detective led them down a labyrinth of corridors and in spite of blockers and masking sprays, Will caught the underlying scent of Alpha everywhere. It felt like swimming in shark-infested waters and added to his growing insecurity. He thought of Hannibal and wished he were by his side.

"Shame Jerome didn't punch one of the patrol officers, he would be charged under the ninety-day rule." Kellerman opened a door and ushered them through. "If a law enforcement officer is assaulted in the line of duty, the attacker is automatically jailed for ninety days with no chance of bail."

The trio watched Kellerman as he reached the desk. "It's all set up. A direct feed to the interview room. It's wired for sound so you can see and hear." He switched on the computer screen. "There's a slap up meal waiting if you nail the bastard, my treat. Jerome's an arrogant piece of shit and someone needs to wipe the smile off his face."

"Keyed up?" Will asked after Kellerman had left.

Saul looked at the Omega as if he had just been insulted. "Interrogation technique is part of the training. A part I liked."

"You like every part of your job. Even the paperwork. Every task completed means you've hammered another nail into a trafficker's coffin." Will stated. "Krendler said you got shot rescuing Omegas. That's dedication."

"That was my rookie mistake." Saul said soberly. "Every agent has one."

"What went wrong?"

"Omega auction at an old army base, my first time undercover. SWAT set up a perimeter so no one could escape and I was told to stand down once the raid started. One asshole was trading two five-year old girls, they were locked in a dog cage inside his Road Trek. I couldn't get the look on their faces out of my head. When SWAT swarmed in, Mr Asshole made a getaway so acting on impulse I intervened. Got shot in the arm for my trouble."

"Were the girls rescued?" Will felt fearful until Saul nodded an affirmation.

"The vehicle didn't even make it out of the compound. At least I learned two valuable lessons that day."

"What were they?"

"Always obey orders and getting shot hurts like hell." Saul breathed in deeply. "That was my one and only rookie mistake. They say the first can cost you early promotion. The second can cost you your job or your life."

Will took his place by Bowman's side as Saul tucked a manila folder under his arm and left. Will's good luck wish went unspoken.

Saul's approach was low-key and methodical, jabbing questions at the younger Alpha, switching from Meyer to Wagner. Jonathan Jerome stone walled at first, but ten minutes into the interview his desperation to show off his prowess lured him into the game.

Saul's expression never changed, even after thirty minutes of questioning, even when he accumulated fresh information from Jerome's seemingly vacuous replies. When Jerome asked if the girls were raped before being murdered, Saul answered with an emphatic no, suggesting the murderer could only perform after the victims were dead. Like a petulant child, Jerome crossed his arms over his chest and closed up. The lawyer became twitchy and requested a comfort break. Saul readily agreed then promptly left the room.

Saul's first words to Will and Bowman when he returned to the observation room were. "He keeps his cool. The only time he reacted was when I inferred the murderer violated the corpses."

"It's all about the image. He wants to be the bogey man." Will replied. "When he gets caught, he wants people back at home to describe him as a monster. Say the town lived in fear of him while he was growing up. If his sexual deviancy got out, they'd think of him as a sick freak. Turn him into a joke."

"He was hoping I'd throw fresh evidence at him. Types like Jerome enjoy the thrill of lying under pressure. Makes them believe they're the cleverest man in the room."

"Jack said I could talk to him." Will said warily, afraid of his colleague's reaction.

Katz looked briefly at Bowman for confirmation before speaking. "What do you have in mind?"

"Dent his pride by belittling him. He kills young Omegas because he doesn't think they will amount to much. Let's see what happens when he faces one who's around his age but in a position of authority." Will calculated the best approach. "If he thinks you're the best, then I'm the FBI's profiler extraordinaire. Just go along with everything I say and don't contradict me. He'll soon act out."

Saul eyed the monitor waiting for Jerome and his lawyer to return. "I need to brief you before we go in."

"Hey, I can handle it." Will protested.

"You're not experienced enough to go in unprepared." Saul's reply was purposeful and serious. "Keep to the ground rules. Don't go beyond the scope of the investigation. Don't offer him a deal, it's not yours to make. If he suggests there are other victims, ignore him. Above all, whatever the circumstances, never give out personal information. Understood?"

Alana swerved elegantly between the shoppers as she exited the book store. Finally in carefree mode, she swung her tote bags wide as she turned the corner. Feeling the impact as a bag hit the wall, she stopped and inspected the damage. With books threatening to escape through the gaping tear, her happiness bubble deflated.

"Need a hand?"

Alana recognised the cultured tone and looked at her saviour then down again as the bag emptied its contents onto the sidewalk. Wincing, she returned her gaze to Antony. "I think I overdid the buying."

Producing a foldable from his jacket pocket, he bent down and transferred the goods into his environmentally friendly bag. Holding up a book, he queried. "Field guide to identification of butterflies?"

"It's for Willow. I blame you. She's been obsessed with butterflies ever since you gave her that colouring book."

"I'll remind you of your words when she becomes Professor Willow Lecter, Head of Entomology." Antony smiled. "I was going to grab a bite to eat at Antonio's. They've introduced a new menu. Would you care to join me?"

Alana glanced at the people sitting at the other tables, thankful the restaurant was light on patrons.

"I was thinking of a glass of the house white. It's very good." Antony suggested.

"The way I'm feeling I could drink a whole bottle on my own."

Antony gave the waitress their order who, remembering him as a generous tipper, waltzed away smiling. "How are you really, Alana? You seem somewhat down."

Alana was surprised as the words spilled out of her mouth. "I've lost my job or the job is about to lose me. The governing body decided I am no longer the right person for the post."

"I take it there has been a disagreement?" Antony inquired.

"Not exactly. The board did not think it prudent, in the current climate, to have an Alpha as the *face* of the clinic." Alana replied. "To be more specific, they believe the Omega clinic should be headed by an Omega."

"Ouch." Antony said surprised. "I didn't see that coming."

"Neither did I. Not after years of running the clinic and devoting my spare time raising funds. The board acted covertly, trying to groom my colleagues into their way of thinking." Alana smothered her distress. "That's what hurt the most."

"So they've asked you to leave?" Antony probed carefully.

"Not exactly. They are quite happy for me to keep my patient quota and work the same long hours. As long as I stay in the background. They're waiting for my answer so, at present, we are all limbo."

"They want to hold onto their cake and eat it as well."

"They were probably afraid I would sue if they forced me out so they came up with the perfect solution."

"What did your parents say?" Alana's sheepish smile gave Antony the answer to his question. "Oh, you haven't told them, have you?"

"I'm trying to find the right moment." Alana shook her head slowly. "Who am I kidding? There is never going to be a right moment. Father will rant about how the Sutcliffe's founded the clinics and mother will pretend to understand their point of view then storm the next board meeting and confront them."

"So you either leave or curl up into a little ball and let them kick you around." Antony saw Alana's pained expression. "I apologise that was uncalled for. I sense you are considering staying rather than giving them the one finger salute."

"Don't apologise, you've described my dilemma accurately." She gave a weak smile. "Someone I confided in, at first, assumed the board's action against me was prompted by professional misconduct. If I stay a demotion could affect my career."

"You wouldn't have unburdened yourself if you hadn't been seeking advice. It's easier to talk to someone who isn't directly involved." Antony leaned across the table, took her hand and tried to keep the conversation positive. "In my twenties I took an assignment in Australia, tracking down rare species in the middle of nowhere. My friends thought I was crazy and wouldn't last a week let alone six months. I discovered that the locals, once they got used to my accent, were warm, funny and welcoming. They had the kind of intelligence that comes from living life without luxuries. They were self-reliant, had a make do attitude, overcoming obstacles by using anything that came to hand. With no internet and crapola on the television, I began writing my first Adonis Blue novel. It changed my life."

Alana laughed. "Are you suggesting I search for a marsupial who needs a roomie?"

Antony smiled warmly at Alana's attempt to be jovial. "Universities such as Oxford are crying out for researchers. Studies into pheromones, heat cycles of Omegas are big business. There is huge funding for the development of suppressants that are side effect free. Don't resign, take a sabbatical. In a year or two, the board may have come to its senses and beg you to return."

"Perhaps I'm programmed for a future filled with the humdrum rather than the unknown."

"Whether it's leaving school or home, we all have to say goodbye to the things we know and hello to the things we don't." Antony replied sympathetically.

Alana gave him a smile of resignation. "You're not telling me anything I haven't already told myself."

"Your whole life has been Baltimore-centric but there is a world beyond. Don't be timorous, Alana, be bold."

Besides the table and four chairs, the interview room was sparse, devoid of any traces of the world outside. Jonathan Jerome was about five seven in his shoes and weighed around one hundred and thirty pounds dripping wet.

"He's an Omega." Jerome almost shouted as Will took his seat.

"No shit." Will teased, thinking of how Jorgensen had reacted when they had first met. "Aren't you clever."

"They shouldn't let his kind join the Bureau." Jerome directed his statement at Saul.

"The FBI is open to all dynamics." Saul corrected the other Alpha then forced a smile at his colleague. "Special Consultant Graham is one of our very best profilers."

"You are here as a witness, Mr Jerome, not a suspect. The actualities are still cloudy but I believe Leif Stephens killed Macey Wagner." Jerome's dead eyed stare told Will he did not believe a word coming out of his mouth. "Stephens knew Macey. At that time of her disappearance he was running stolen goods through his colleagues. His rap sheet is littered with similar crimes. Another arrest and it would have been back to jail. My guess, and Agent Katz agrees with me, is that Macey found out about his activities and was going to turn him in. Stephens killed her to shut her up."

"Leif is no killer." Jerome stated. Will read the Alpha's smug smile as meaning *"Fuck you, Omega, you're so wrong."*

"You don't think we believe his hokey story, do you?" Will said with absolute assurance. "Stephens somehow found out about Juliette Meyer, knew you had been questioned, so he set you up for Macey's murder. Stephens saw you as his perfect little patsy."

"I'm no one's patsy." Jerome snapped back.

"Oh, please." Will rolled his eyes while acclimatizing to the rising tension in the room. "You have patsy written all over you. Sure, you had a couple of run-ins with cops when you were a kid but not of such magnitude to scream future criminal mastermind."

"There isn't going to be a happy outcome for Stephens." Saul interjected. "He'll wind up in jail or dead. All these killers are dumb-fucks."

"Do you know there's an ugly rumour going around Fork River that your daddy murdered Juliette. Bet those Omegas are behind it, the ones protesting in town." Will gave Jerome his sweetest of smiles. "Of course he's innocent but mud sticks. To shut down the talk, I bet your daddy is going to have to allow his land to be searched."

The lawyer leant to one side and whispered into Jerome's ear before settling his sharp eyes on the Omega. "We understand that an Omega boy is being sought in connection with the death of the Meyer girl."

"The Omega's a credible witness. He doesn't match my profile of the killer." Will drawled, exaggerating his southern roots. "The boy who killed Juliette has a daddy who would beat down on him for any infraction of the rules. Daddy would see gentleness as a sign of moral deformity. The boy would hang around the popular Alphas but they didn't want to know him. As he got older he became hardened and cynical, a narcissist with no wisdom or self-awareness. He'd chose a young female Omega with a petite frame as his victim. A meatier girl may have fought back. It still had to be a sneak attack, just in case. He's a spineless predator with no redeemable traits and zero personality. A nasty, sociopathic, scum sucking, bottom feeder. That's the truth to him."

"That's quite impressive." Jerome edged forward in his chair and placed his hands palms down on the table. Will could feel real anger oozing from Jerome, saw the hate on his face. "Maybe after all of this, I'll get to know you better. Show you a good time."

"Well, aren't you sweet." Will smiled politely, ignoring the implied threat.

"You're not his brand." Saul said contemptuously. "He prefers real Alphas."

"I am beginning not to like you, Agent Katz." Jerome growled.

"You'll like me even less when this investigation is over." Saul replied dryly.

"This killer also has mummy issues." Will knew he had hit the sore spot when Jerome's top lip curled exposing his teeth. "She doesn't care for sex. She believes Omegas are dirty little things who can't stop fucking and has crammed her opinion into her son's head. Problem is all her talk has made him want a piece of the fun. He's tried dating Omegas but they turn him down because they can see he's wired wrongly. This pathetic creature can't make it with the living so that's why he kills them. A dead Omega can't say no. He has no control over his bodily functions, suffers from erectile dysfunction. Probably still pisses the bed."

"We need to put out a new APB." Saul taunted. "Suspect is a limp dick necrophiliac who wears adult diapers."

Jerome suddenly jolted forward into Will's space and glared at him. Will half smiled in return, seeing Jerome agonisingly close, deliciously close to exploding.

"The whole tone of this interview is disrespectful to my client." The lawyer blustered.

"It's the murderer I'm disrespecting, counsellor, not your client. Unless, of course, you think Jonathan is...." Will leaned back into his chair and smirked. "...a limp dick, diaper wearing, necrophiliac."

"Let's go." The lawyer rose from his seat and ordered Jerome to do likewise. Will's eyes never left the pair as they departed from the room.

"He was close to hitting you." Saul had seen it before.

"He's sure as hell mad at us." Will fought the urge to laugh out loud, knowing it would be viewed as unprofessional. "Let's follow them outside, see if we can't poke him a little more."

Saul looked at him oddly until Will offered up an explanation. "The ninety day rule. If he takes a swing at one of us, he'll go straight to jail."

Hannibal grabbed his car keys and jacket immediately after his conversation with Mrs Olyphant ended. He had thanked the teacher for calling and informed her that he would leave immediately to pick up his ailing daughter. Any misgivings about hiring Della evaporated

when the girl insisted she was more than capable of looking after Tomas on her own, pointing out that Walt Foster was working in the garden should she need help.

Mrs Olyphant met Hannibal as he entered the school building. Apologising profusely for taking Hannibal away from his work, he assured her the welfare of his children was the most important factor in his life. Hannibal hated being stereotyped. Although Alphas had the reputation of putting business before family, he found the idea abhorent.

"She was fine until after lunch." Mrs Olyphant explained as they walked toward the nurse's office. "It was Gabriella who told me Willow was feeling unwell. She did look rather pale so I kept an eye on her. I was very worried when she began to hyperventilate, I know she's not asthmatic, so I thought it best to contact you. The school nurse took charge of her and, of course, Gabriella is at her sister's side. Where one goes, the other will follow."

Willow sprung from her chair towards Hannibal as soon as he entered the room. Bending down on one knee, he caught her in his arms and tenderly embraced her. When she buried her face into her father's neck and sobbed, Hannibal found himself drenched in his little Omega's sadness. Experience had taught him that patience was the key and he had to allow the little girl to expel her tears before tweezering out the root of her suffering. Gabriella hurried over and stood by her father, her face wan.

"Daddy." Willow sniffled out as she lifted her head. "Daddy, where's Papa?"

Hannibal gently rubbed the back of her neck. "He is at work, Willow, he will be home soon."

"He won't." Willow gulped down a sob and hugged her father tighter. "He won't come home ever."

They followed Jerome and his lawyer from the building into the parking area, maintaining a reasonable distance between them. Will managed to keep up with Saul's military swing style step, spurred on by the prospect of putting Jerome behind bars. Katz slowed the pace when the other men halted by the Lincoln then feeling the vibration, he pulled his cell phone from the holster clipped to his belt. The Omega was oblivious to the conversation as he continued to focus on their prey. Will watched as the lawyer opened the car door and handed Jerome a leather jacket, which he casually slipped on. Jerome seemed amused, dutifully holding the lawyer's case, as the other man frantically searched through his pockets until pulling out a handkerchief and sneezing into it.

"That was Jack, he said junior's game is over. The dad rolled on him." Saul broke into a fast walk. "Do you want to cuff him or shall I do it?"

On reaching the pair, Will found the situation surreal when none of them spoke for several seconds. The look on Jerome's face told Will that he knew.

Will was suddenly brought back to reality when he saw the drawing back of Jerome's arm and the twisting of his body. He was already ducking when Jerome swung the case at his face. The vicious swipe missed him by a fraction but Saul crumpled to the floor after it caught him squarely on the side of his head. The pent up rage inside the Omega rattled loose and when Jerome dropped the case and fled, Will raced after him.

Chapter 17

Will settled into a smooth rhythm, not getting any closer to his quarry but not falling further behind either. Stepping from the asphalt of the parking lot onto the cement sidewalk was jarring but within two steps, he was back into his stride. Pedestrians slowed down as the young men raced past them, some turning to follow the action with their eyes. Jerome veered across the street taking his chances with the oncoming traffic and as cars screeched to a halt, Will followed, disregarding his own safety. The pursuit continued past a long line of red brick buildings until the Alpha took a sharp left turn, toppling over a large trash bin with a ferocious back kick. With garbage spewing across his path, Will weaved his way around without losing momentum.

Jerome vanished from the Omega's line of sight when he darted around another corner and on reaching the turn, Will stuttered to a stop. Sandwiched between two buildings, the alleyway was narrow with a high wall at the far end and halfway down stood a motionless Jonathan Jerome. Suddenly the Alpha sprinted towards the wall and leaping up, grabbed the top with his hands. His feet unsuccessfully scrabbled for purchase against the bricks before he released his hold. For a few precious seconds Will relaxed, taking the opportunity to catch his breath, until Jerome slowly turned around and walked purposely towards him. The sickening realisation there was only one viable exit and he was blocking it slowly dawned on the Omega.

As a mental paralysis engulfed him, Will stood rigid, his fight or flight instinct deserting him. He was in no fit state to do either with his lungs aching from exertion and his heart thumping fear throughout his body. Jerome's hand disappeared into the jacket pocket and reappeared holding a small object. It took one quick flick of the Alpha's thumb for the blade to snap into place. More scared than he thought possible, Will could only gasp in air as Jerome closed down the gap between them. His eyes fixated on the Alpha's feet and he counted every step that brought him nearer. Too exhausted to run, unable to think straight, Will forced himself to look into the face of his would be executioner hoping to summon enough hate-infused anger to go down fighting.

Without warning, the powerful shove pitched him sideways and as he flung out his hands to break his fall, he heard a voice shout out. "Drop the weapon."

Will's mind skidded out of control as he tried to make sense of the situation. Everything around him seemed unreal. Saul stood stock still, a two handed grip on the Glock, his finger tightening on the trigger.

"Drop it or I'll drop you."

As his focus shifted between friend and foe, Will saw fear in Jerome's eyes. Jerome loosened his grip and as the switchblade dropped to the ground, he raised both hands above his head. The whooping siren signalled the arrival of a cruiser. Will glanced in its direction in time to see it pull up and two uniformed cops jump out. As Saul barked out orders, the officers approached Jerome with weapons drawn and in one fluid movement forced him face down on

the ground. Hands cuffed behind his back, Jerome was unceremoniously hauled up then dragged to the vehicle. Only then did Saul return his gun to its holster.

Will looked up at Katz. "What I did....running after Jerome....it was just plain stupid." Will shook his head in disbelief. "Are you going to tell Jack?"

"No." Saul bent over and helped the Omega to his feet. "You are."

Will brushed invisible dirt off his pants then wiped his sweat soaked brow with the back of his hand.

"Hey, Graham." Saul waited until the Omega made eye contact before continuing. "That was your rookie mistake."

The atmosphere in the squad room was ripe with high-octane banter. Even the stilted Kellerman talked animatedly, trading quips with the patrol officers who had frogmarched Jerome into the booking area. People milled in to offer their congratulations to the triumphant team, frequently overlooking the Omega's contribution to Jerome's downfall. Will was grateful for the anonymity and prayed hard it stayed that way. Saul Katz, hero of the hour, sat still while Bowman examined him.

"No concussion but there's a possibility of a hairline fracture." Bowman murmured as he glided his fingers over Saul's scalp. "You need to be examined at the hospital."

"I'm fine." The agent replied impatiently. "I just need to get on with my job."

"Don't argue." Bowman said firmly. "I don't make the rules. Head injuries can be tricky. If things go wrong, I could lose my licence."

"Remember MacClusky? He refused to get checked out after he hit his head." A burly cop addressed Kellerman. " Next day at roll call his head exploded and his eyeballs flew straight out of the window."

"Go to hell." Saul shouted out above the laughter, trying hard not to smile. In the background Will could hear someone clucking like a chicken.

"I'll come back for you after I've driven Will to....." Bowman turned to the Omega. "What was the name of the place?"

"The Sanctuary." Will replied, avoiding eye contact with the doctor. When he had known it would be just he and Bowman in the vehicle, Will had hurriedly arranged the visit to Frederick. Despite Hannibal's denials, there was always a degree of ownership in an Alpha Omega marriage. Arriving home in a car chauffeured by a handsome, unbonded Alpha was the surest way to fire up Hannibal's possessive streak.

After Saul grudgingly gave in to the doctor's demand, Bowman grabbed his jacket indicating he was ready to leave. Drinking the last of his coffee, Will tossed the styrofoam cup into a bin and as he began to move, Saul's arm shot out in front of him blocking his path.

"Speak to Crawford before I'm obliged to file my report." Saul ordered.

Will gave him a warm smile followed by a mock salute, comforted that his colleague was back to his drill sergeant self.

Bowman was a careful driver and never exceeded the limit. Soothed by the smooth ride, Will remained on the quiet side, his imagination constantly reshaping the chase. When they hit the familiar landmarks leading up to the Sanctuary, he finally decompressed. His call to Jack was over quickly. Will kept to the minimum, explaining he had acted foolishly by chasing Jerome and sounding his apology. Jack's reply began with a rollicking over disobeying procedure followed by a gruff *you are lucky you're not in hospital or the morgue.* He ended the conversation after congratulating the Omega on a job well done. Will was never fazed by Crawford's mixed messages, he knew deep down Jack cared about his team's welfare.

The vehicle pulled into the Sanctuary's visitor's parking area and Bowman eyed the building. "You used to live here? It looks clinical."

Will cherry picked his words. He seldom talked about the other Will Graham, the one before Hannibal. "This was the best place for me after Hobbs. I spent too long with grief landing everywhere, it gave me a clean slate. Frederick and the others are crazy in a good sort of way. Being around them made it impossible not to smile again."

Bowman shifted his attention to the Omega next to him. "I know what it's like to lose your parents at a tender age, wake up one day and find yourself an orphan."

"You don't like sharing personal information." Will wasn't completely sure whose reticence he was voicing.

"I don't want to appear to be competing. I've met people who have falsely laid claim to a similar trauma. It's hard to tell who's genuine and who's feigning victimhood."

"The doctors at Quantico faked understanding to get me to talk. All the while, they would be observing my body language to see if I was play acting." Will turned his head away as tears welled up in his eyes. He had forgotten how badly their trickery had hurt him. Feeling self-conscious as he battled with the raw emotions he had unearthed, Will flipped the conversation back to Bowman. "What happened to your parents?"

"My father was a freelance analyst. After landing a lucrative contract, he took my mother out for a celebratory dinner at a fancy restaurant. On their way home a tyre blew out and the car crashed. They never stood a chance. I went to live with my uncle, he was the local doctor in a three store town." Bowman said ruefully. "After city life, man, that place was boring."

"He was the reason you became a doctor." It was more of an observation than declaration on Will's part.

"Influence can come from unexpected quarters. Once I got used to his old-fashioned ways, I began to look up to him. He was a good man, well respected." Bowman said nostalgically. "If you ever want to talk, I won't drown you in pity. You would no more appreciate it than I would. I know you have an Alpha but my door is always open if you need a friend."

Will's eyes met with Bowman's and saw it wasn't an empty gesture. "Hannibal tries to be condoling but not experiencing my kind of loss makes it hard for him to empathise. I found it easier to talk to Jack. He did a good line in stoic professionalism coupled with well timed reassuring nods. It was kinda like entering the confessional and having your sins expunged."

"He took on the role of father confessor." Bowman remarked. "Jack is a great guy but the Ripper rules his life. He's still chasing his great white whale. There's talk around the Bureau that Jack is manipulating you into joining the hunt."

"Jack's obsession is his alone." Will unbuckled the seat belt then reached for the door handle, effectively ending their conversation. "I made a deal with Hannibal. I'm not going to break it."

"Is Willow unwell?" Frederick asked after the Omega's call had ended.

"No, she's fine. Her imagination got the better of her." Will ignored the look Frederick gave him as he slid his cell into his pocket. He had been shocked to the core when Hannibal had contacted him, telling him of Willow's distress. How his little girl had sensed he was in danger was beyond Will's understanding.

Will watched as Frederick pecked away at his laptop with two fingers. Drawn to the papers scattered across the desk, Will leaned forward and picked up a sheet.

"Leave it." Frederick snapped. "I know where everything is, thank you very much. I don't need you making a mess of my system."

"What are you doing anyway?" Will asked as he relaxed back into his chair, tempted to lift his feet and rest them on Frederick's mahogany desk, in order to see how the Beta would react. Being in Frederick's office always brought the Omega's impish side to the surface.

Frederick looked up, a sombre expression covering his face. "The Chesapeake Omegan Society has asked me to give a speech on the Omegan struggle for independence. I considered talking about how Alphan dominance has created a homogenized, secular Omegan society."

"That sounds more like an Abelism than a Chilton original."

"I may be guilty of plagiarism but Abel has an insight on the human psyche like no other."

"Just don't go calling anyone the spawn of Satan's seed." Will chuckled. "I know Abel primed you before the demonstration and look how you winded up."

"That as maybe but I need his help. I'm out of my depth."

"Then why the heck did you agree to it, Frederick?" Will sank further into the leather chair, knowing Frederick was about to unleash a tale of woe.

"It was the Society, Will, how could I refuse? I was flattered. Having spoken before at their meetings, I assumed I would be facing my usual audience; senior citizens attracted by the free refreshments. How could I know the doyens of Baltimore Society would be attending because *he* is going to speak?" Frederick's voice was a blend of indignation and frustration.

"Who's the he?"

"Donald. Donald Sutcliffe. Rumour has it he is going to give a keynote speech on Omegan rights. I'm doomed, Will. I haven't his flair for public speaking. I do not have the X factor. I know how boring I sound. Boring is my trademark."

Will tried to sound breezy while offering an escape route. "Back out. Say you've made a mistake, forgot a long standing engagement and you've double booked."

"I can't, Will, I can't." Frederick whined. "They went to so much trouble inviting me, I couldn't let her down."

"Oh." Will smiled slyly "Her as in Barbara Komeda."

"It may have been Barbara who did the asking." Frederick said, his cheeks turning a deep shade of pink. "I don't see why that matters?"

"It matters because a speech has to come from the heart to be successful. If you're doing it to try and impress Mrs Komeda, you're gonna fail."

"I like Barbara. I have always had a fondness for her. When she asked me I couldn't say no."

"Frederick, being stressed isn't doing you any good."

"Stressed?" Frederick exclaimed, gripping the edge of the desk and leaning forward. "I'll tell you what stress is. Stress is seeing Abel lurking around Barbara like an oversexed tortoise."

"He wasn't lurking, Frederick, he's trying....." Will trailed off before he said too much.

"I know lurking when I see it and Abel was lurking." Frederick hissed. "He was even hiding behind the bushes outside Barbara's office window so he could spy on her."

Will sighed in exasperation. "If you're gonna face the doyens then ask Robert for help. He is good with words. Even Uncle Donald consults him before every important speech. Come over for dinner one evening and talk to him."

Frederick cocked his head to one side. "I suppose the Beast will be there?"

"It's his home, Frederick, of course Hannibal will be there." Will rolled his eyes. "Besides you haven't visited for a while and you know how the kids love spending time with their Grandpa Frederick."

As Will exited the Sanctuary's main doors, Frederick's doom laden moans were still ringing in his ears. He saw Abel sitting in the Ford flatbed and acknowledged him with a wave of the hand. Will wondered how the jalopy could possibly be road worthy when it was held together by prayer, duct tape and luck. Reaching the bottom of the Sanctuary's steps, he saw her walking towards him. Her dark hair cut into a stylish bob and wearing a smart powder blue suit, she looked younger than her years. In that instant, he could see why Frederick was smitten.

"Will, it's good to see you again." Barbara smiled warmly. "Are you leaving?"

Will returned the smile and gestured towards the vehicle. "Abel's giving me a ride home." They both turned their heads in time to see the Beta duck behind the driver's wheel.

Barbara sighed. "Abel and I really do need to sit down and talk face- to- face."

"I heard there was a misunderstanding."

"Frederick completely got the wrong idea when I said Abel's behaviour unsettled me. If that wasn't bad enough, Abel wrote me a letter explaining that the drugs given to him during his incarceration had compromised his libido. I cannot fathom their reasoning. I never believed Abel was interested in me romantically."

"They're like an old married couple. They feed off each other's crazy notions. Sometimes they are in sync other times they bicker." Will laughed. "Guess that's what happens when you work side by side and share the same living quarters for years and years."

"Oh, now I understand." Barbara patted Will on the arm. "I have to run, I'm late. Perhaps one day we'll find time to have a get-to-know-you chat"

Will watched as she began to climb the stairs. After a few steps she stopped and looked back at him with another warm smile on her face. "Those silly boys should have told me. I wouldn't dream of coming between them."

Will took the opportunity as Abel drove him home to unburden himself completely. He recounted his experiences at Quantico, purposely including the attack by Krendler and the events of that day. His trust in Abel was absolute. The Beta was more than the man who helped raise him; he was the Omega's friend and de facto guide.

"Did chasing after a murderer on your own suddenly strike you as a good idea?" Abel asked when they came to a stop outside the gates of DuMaurier house. "Or did a little birdie

tweet *go-go-go* in your ear?"

"I was angry. He had snuffed out the lives of two Omega girls and he was going to get away."

"All that coiled up resentment inside of you finally found an outlet." Abel drummed his fingers on the dash.

"Jerome knew he was finished, knew the game he was playing was over. He was determined to take another girl's life, any girl's life, before he was locked up for good. I had no choice. I had to stop him."

Abel nodded and stared into space. "Whose voice was tweeting inside your head when he turned the tables?"

"I momentarily drifted away from my reality." Will closed his eyes briefly as he accessed his memory. "I visualised Macey and Juliette, imagined how he killed them, imagined their last moments. They couldn't escape him, there was nowhere to run. I experienced the horror of looking into the eyes of my killer as he slowly squeezed the life out of me."

"Entering deep inside the minds of the victims implies your fort building ability is compromised. You were taught to treat your interpretation of a crime as an intellectual exercise." The Beta intoned. "My advice would be to return to meditation and prioritise containment. That is, of course, if you *are* seeking words of wisdom."

"Doctor Gideon's magic cure-all, meditation and containment. Suppose I did learn how to control this?" Will tapped his head with his finger. "If I was real FBI instead of pretend, I could save countless lives."

"You should review the company you keep. If you continue to associate with Jack Crawford, you will become intoxicated with his madness. Become more than a pretender in his pack."

"Why does everybody criticise Jack?" Will asked, the irritation noticeable in his voice. "I owe him, Abel. He never stopped looking for me, even when the other agencies pulled out. He never valued my life less worthy of saving because I'm an Omega."

Abel turned in his seat to face his young friend. "Jack Crawford, the fisher of men. Despite your protestations, young Will, he will gradually reel you in. You would be the trinket Jack would value above all the others. The gift that keeps on giving."

Will sighed in defeat, tired of defending Crawford. "Omegas can only work under the terms and conditions set out by Alphas. The men at the top of the FBI are old school; we are light years away from my kind becoming bona fide field agents."

"Even the most private of private clubs are changing, embracing the new Omega friendly paradigm." Abel said in his distinct tone while scrutinising the Omega with curious eyes. "What will you do when the FBI resets its boundaries and offers you tokens of goodwill? Will you become the pilgrim on the road to fulfilment or will you deny yourself the thing you desire the most?"

Will's arrival went unnoticed. Standing in the hallway, Will gazed into the sitting room and was presented with the perfect family tableau. Della stood with Tomas in her arms while the other children sat on the floor looking up at her, to one side Hannibal dressed in grey suit pants and black shirt, fiddled with his cufflinks. Feeling like an outsider in his own home, Will's heart began to sink. Then Willow sprung up and clapped her hands after catching sight of her Papa, running straight into the Omega's outstretched arms as he bent down to receive her. Immediately, Ella and Andrius joined them and Will was flooded with love when their kisses peppered his cheeks. Listening to the children's chatter, Will noticed Andrius gazing with fascination at the shiny symbol of authority attached to his belt.

"You can take a look but I need it back." Will rose and unclipped his badge, handing it to his wide-eyed son.

When Hannibal slipped into his suit jacket as he strode towards them, Will didn't need to be told he was going out. The gentle, teasing kiss the Alpha gave him prompted the children to return to the sitting room giggling.

"Max del Portro is in town. He has requested we meet and discuss business over dinner. I apologise for the short notice but his commission is very important. If I can persuade him to allow one of my trainees to supervise his project, it will enhance the reputation of the firm."

"You'd think your clients would realise you only hire the best." Will covered his disappointment with a smile. Over the years he had learned to accept, occasionally, the Alpha's career had to come first.

"I employ two rising stars and if not allowed to shine, they will branch out on their own. Unfortunately a few intractable clients demand preferential treatment and will only deal with the head of the organisation."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Hopefully, not too long. I have arranged to meet him at the Connaught hotel."

"Trying to impress, huh? Taking him to a place where, in order to dine in their haute cuisine restaurant, you have to book weeks in advance." Will grinned. "Do your clients know that you were the architect who redesigned the interior and part of your fee was a table permanently reserved for your exclusive use?"

Hannibal responded with a humorous glint in his eyes. "If they care to believe I can instantly open doors that are closed to others, it can only be good for business. Why shatter the illusion?"

"I'd wish you good luck but you don't need it. You can charm the birds right out of the trees." Will took a step back and looked Hannibal up and down. His flippancy vanished, replaced by a bizarre wave of anxiety. "You look too damn sexy."

"I will not be home late, I promise." Hannibal moved forward and snaked a hand around the Omega's waist, locking him in his grip. The kiss was both sensuous and reassuring. When it ended, Will rested his head against the Alpha's chest, not wanting them to part.

"There is a package for you on the bureau." Hannibal said softly. "I did not see it amongst the morning post so I am assuming it was delivered by hand. Perhaps it is work related?"

Will waited until the Bentley reached the end of the driveway before going back into the house. He wandered into the sitting room where Della, trying hard not to display signs of fatigue, stifled the yawn with her hand. He picked up the small package resting on the bureau and ripped it open, pulling out its contents. Unfolding the cream coloured note paper, his interest piqued on seeing a key taped to its bottom right hand corner. Perpetually marooned in a sea of doubt, the sentiments expressesed in the distinctive hand written script reached down to a place deep in the Omega's heart. Will's face turned crimson and he could swear the heat from his cheeks could ignite the furnishings. Will shifted position, trying to regain his composure, trying to rid his face of the stupid grin. Once he was satisfied he was back in control, he turned to Della and asked as casually as possible.

"Are you free tomorrow?"

Max del Portro slid onto the stool next to Hannibal and they eased into a conversation, catching up on each other's lives since their last meeting. Hannibal liked the man, liked his directness and sense of humour. They shared similar visions, came from a similar background and both had carved out successful careers through hard work and persistence rather than relying on family connections. From where he sat at the bar, Hannibal could see a waiter in the dining area polishing the crystal wine glasses in preparation for the Alpha's arrival. As he scanned the room, Hannibal noticed a man towering over a woman seated in the corner. With her long shiny hair and large does eyes, she seemed vaguely familiar. He observed her shake her head then twist it away as the man attempted to caress her face. For a fleeting moment, her gaze flicked towards his and Hannibal saw desperation.

"Excuse me for a moment." Hannibal said to his companion. He slipped off the bar stool and threaded his way through the crowded bar to the distressed Omega.

"I am afraid you are mistaken if you believe this young lady is in need of your attention." Hannibal could smell the alcohol on the other Alpha. Caught by surprise, the inebriated man debated his next move, silently weighing up his opponent. Hannibal sensed the man was preparing to stand his ground.

"I am younger and stronger than you and have the advantage of being sober." Hannibal's voice held a hint of contempt. "Rather than make an exhibition of yourself, I suggest you

leave before your face becomes acquainted with my fist."

The sneer etched on the man's face faded. He drew in a breath and backed away from the table. Once the man had disappeared from her view the Omega spoke.

"You keep rescuing me, Mr Lecter."

Hannibal finally placed a name to the face. "I do not like to see a lady in distress, Miss Verger."

"I brought it on myself. It wasn't wise to frequent a bar without a chaperone." Hannibal's strong masculine scent filled her senses and she lowered her head, aware she was baring her neck.

"You are not to blame."

The Alpha's words coaxed a sad smile from Margot. "My brother would say otherwise. He believes an unaccompanied Omega is asking for trouble. Although this is the first time since I began staying here I've experienced problems."

"You are on you own?" Hannibal inquired.

"My brother can get hostile towards me and if I stand up to him there are consequences." She visibly shuddered. "When the first sign of a tantrum manifests, I make a quick exit and try to stay out of his reach."

"This is your retreat."

"It's my safe house."

"If you feel vulnerable staying in the bar area I will gladly escort you back to your room."

Margot looked into the Alpha's flirty brown eyes and her heart gave a little flip. "You are very kind but I have taken up enough of your time. My friend will be here shortly. She messaged me before your timely intervention."

Hannibal gave a slight bow of his head. "Then I will return to my seat. I will keep watch over you until your friend arrives, if you have no objection."

Their eyes engaged briefly and she could see he was enraptured. The static charge of electricity buzzed between them and Margot's heart beat a little faster. He was more handsome than any man she had known.

"Thank you." She said appreciatively, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "You are truly my knight in shining armour."

Will allowed the children to stay up a little later than usual before bathing them and tucking them up in their beds, then indulged them further by reading two stories instead of the normal one. When exhaustion from his madcap day overtook him, Will borrowed one of Robert's beloved detective novels and retired early. Barely half a chapter in, he drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Will woke to his Alpha's arm over him, holding him close. He could hear the clock in the hallway ticking, each minute inching towards his secret rendezvous. His mind was giddy at the prospect.

"Good morning." The accented voice said then soft lips planted a kiss on the nape of Will's neck. "I have to leave early, I have a busy day ahead of me."

Will threw back the bed covers and replied. "So have I."

Over breakfast, Hannibal was full of his meeting with del Portro. The Omega was pleased when his itinerary for the day was overshadowed by the Alpha's success and didn't generate much interest. His well thought out lie involving the Sanctuary went unheard.

He booked the cab from the Double O Company whose latest snappy slogan *driven by Omegas 4 Omegas* appeared on the side of all their cars. The driver knew the back streets of the city and they arrived well before the deadline. Will broke into a smile as he walked to the front door and inserted the key in the lock, having seen the twitch of the drapes in a nearby house. Any activity, even the most mundane, seemed to grab the interest of the neighbours.

The house was quiet and Will took a deep breath before he made his way to the kitchen. An opened bottle of Riesling was next to the coffee machine and Will took a long stemmed glass from the cabinet and half filled it. Sipping the chilled liquid, he heard the footfall and caught the distinctive scent of Alpha. Finishing his wine, he placed the glass on the counter and turned to face the door. The man stood with one hand braced against the doorframe and the other in his pocket. His waistcoat unbuttoned and the neck of his shirt open, he looked magnificent. He walked towards the Omega, slow and deliberate, wearing the look of a predator. A hand rested on Will's hip then, fingers spread, slid around and caressed the globe of his ass. The Alpha's other hand ran through Will's hair, gently tugging it until the Omega was forced to bare his neck. Shivers of delight ran down Will's spine as the man's lips brushed against his before trailing the barest of kisses down his neck. Touched this way, Will involuntarily gave out the sensuous one-note purr designed to draw an Alpha into the rut.

When the man pulled away, Will stared into his eyes and asked coyly. "What are you going to do, Alpha?"

Hannibal leaned forward and in a sultry voice whispered into Will's ear. "Satisfy my sexual needs."

The words sent a spasm of arousal through the Omega's body and as he imagined Hannibal's hot, hard cock inside him, he triple purred.

Chapter 18

Hannibal's kisses were warm and greedy and Will responded zealously. He writhed under the weight of the naked Alpha, savouring the feeling of skin on skin. Consumed by a gnawing want, he no longer cared which way Hannibal fucked him, didn't need foreplay, just needed release. He panted while fingers skimmed along his thigh then played with the tangle of soft, springy hair. Keened loudly when lips brushed against his neck and two slender fingers entered him. It felt so damned good, he needed more. As the Alpha's thickness began to fill him, invading slowly inch by inch, he tipped back his head as shivers of anticipation streamed through his body. When a primal urge forced Hannibal to slam into him, quicker and deeper, the Omega was lost to the intense pleasure wrung out of him by his determined mate. Finally, with harsh breaths and feral growls, the Alpha spilled into him. Will moaned like he was dying when he came.

Hannibal rolled onto his back depleted. The sex flush had disappeared, his heart had stopped pounding and his breathing was normal. Will, his body still pulsing from the afterglow, waited before shifting onto his side and draping his arm over the Alpha's chest. Meeting in secret had felt almost adulterous and had excited Will, as did the possibility that the neighbours may have mistaken him for a high-class whore. He mused whether there would come a day when, within the confines of the bedroom, Hannibal would demand he played that role. Although he was too embarrassed to admit to it, he delighted in being the panacea for his Alpha's lust.

Will couldn't prevent the deep sigh from escaping him. He knew their time together was limited; the spell had to be broken. Propping himself up, he looked down at the Alpha. Wearing the smile of the sated, Hannibal looked almost tame as he reached up and caressed the Omega's face with his hand.

"I could drown in your beautiful blue eyes." He said tenderly.

Will caught the look of adoration on the Alpha's face and a wave of emotion swept over him. Taking in Hannibal's long, muscular frame, even in a state of repose his cock was impressive, he could never understand why such a magnificent man was attracted to him. He became shy again and nestled down against the Alpha. "Your note, it said you ached for me."

"I have missed you, Will. Missed moments like this, the closeness." Hannibal could feel Will's warm breath fan against his neck. "It is not often that I can have you all to myself."

"If I hadn't screwed up over the birth control, you would have still trusted me. We would have gone away for my postpartum heat." Will said heavy with remorse.

Hannibal brought a finger to Will's lips to shush him. "No recriminations. We have both made mistakes in the past. Tomas is not one of them."

The intensity between them made Will misty-eyed. He didn't want to leave but he had no choice. "I've gotta go. Get back in time for the kids."

"And work awaits me." Hannibal turned and smoothed a hand down Will's back. The Omega looked radiant, lovely. "Perhaps we could allow ourselves another five minutes?"

"I know you, honey balls. It'll be another five, then another." Will heard the Alpha huff out a laugh. "Hey, you better not let anyone else call you that."

"Believe me, Will." Hannibal smiled. "You have exclusive rights to the use of that name."

Will sat up slowly. "I pre-booked the cab, it'll be here soon."

Hannibal raised his arms over his head and clutched the metal frame of the headboard, stretching out like an arrogant cat. Through hooded eyes he glanced at the Omega and murmured. "Are you sure I cannot tempt you to stay a little longer?"

Like her mother, Della had the gift for storytelling. Her expressions, gestures and tone painted a vivid picture of the previous day's events. Will could visualise Mrs Foster's mishap with the frosting; witness the baby's tiny fist connecting with Della's nose the first time she tried to pick him up.

"Then old Mr Lecter came out of his office and said to Mrs Foster." Della pitched her voice lower. "Good grief woman, are you covered in pixie dust?"

The heat from the stove warmed the kitchen and Will was glad he had showered away the lingering scent as soon as he arrived home. The distinctive odour of a recently fucked Omega was one that even the best masking sprays could never neutralize and Will could live without the knowing looks. Della poured the coffee into the mug then added the cream and sugar to Will's specifications.

"You seem to have fitted in." Will smiled as he grabbed the mug and strolled over to the island. He glanced at Tomas who sat happily in his high chair fascinated by his teething toy.

Della lapsed into silence before speaking. "I am very grateful to you and Mr H for giving me this chance. I was beginning to think I was unemployable."

"You deserved a break and hey, don't go mistering me. It's Will."

"Mr H said I could address him by his first name but it didn't feel right so we reached a compromise. For one horrible moment I thought he might suggest I call him what my mom calls him."

"What's that?" Will asked intrigued.

"Big guy."

Laughter came easily to Will and when it subsided, a realization dawned on him. Other than his children and the Fosters, he was starved of the company of Omegas.

Enveloped in a cloud of satisfaction, the walk from Chandler Square to his firm had taken Hannibal longer than usual. He had only enough time to remove his jacket before Ardelia sauntered into his office.

"For you." She stated as she placed a blue and gold gift bag on Hannibal's desk. "A courier delivered it while you were out."

"Should I bother opening it or will you tell me what is inside?" He inquired as he placed jacket over the back of his chair. Ardelia possessed qualities Hannibal admired. Smart, competent and loyal, she treated everyone the same whether they were a CEO or janitor.

"Seriously expensive cologne plus a card. It reads *may our relationship continue to flourish, my beautiful friend*."

Curious he opened the bag and took out the cologne. He was used to receiving gifts from grateful clients but generally, they expected their generosity to be acknowledged. He inspected the elegant, cut glass bottle which was far more to his taste than its contents, a heady, spicy scent. He pulled out the card, scanned the flowery script then slipped it into his jacket pocket. Placing the unwanted gift back into the bag he pushed it across the table towards Ardelia.

"Take it. My colognes are bespoke, customised to enhance my scent. Perhaps it would suit one of your sons or you could regift it, impress that snobbish brother-in-law of yours."

"Regift it? Moi?" She said dramatically, faking offense. "Do I look like someone who would regift a freebie and pretend I purchased it?"

"Yes." Hannibal's mouth twitched into a smile. "Is everyone in attendance?"

"Full house." She replied. "I take it you've decided to go ahead with the expansion."

"We need more space and as the new premises are situated on the border of the Omega sector, it will make for an easier commute. I have struck a deal with the realtor that financially favours us. Hopefully I will be able to persuade you and the other members of the team who are not keen on the idea to change your minds."

"Will I get my own office?"

"Naturally." Hannibal replied.

Ardelia beamed. "Always thought expansion was a marvellous idea."

"Liar." Hannibal smiled in return. "Then I can count on your full support?"

"Totally on board." She picked up the bag, clutching it to her bosom and as she turned to leave, she hesitated. She lifted her face and scented the air. "By the way did you enjoy your lunch?"

Unabashed, Hannibal stared directly into her eyes, he knew she could smell Will on him. "It was very enjoyable, thank you."

Sitting by his side as he addressed his colleagues, Ardelia nodded in agreement where appropriate, as Hannibal explained his decision to relocate. Over the years he had allowed his personnel to voice their opinions freely, aware there would be a penalty to pay - perpetual compromise. Walking a narrow path, he never ducked unpalatable decisions yet always tried to be fair. This was the exception, the one occasion when he was determined to quash any dissent. Often told charm was his defining trait, Hannibal applied it liberally. He knew the value of words, their power, and citing critical points for the move, he declared cramped working conditions did not portray the image of a successful business. Laying his soul bare, he defined his visions for their future, gave everyone a sense of inclusion and gradually lured the naysayers into his camp.

Hannibal walked with Ardelia out of the building, he had decided there would be no late evenings for anyone and most of the staff had already slipped away. He could feel a headache brewing and was looking forward to a relaxing evening in the company of his Omega. He was mindful of how fast he walked, Ardelia had often complained she had to break into a sprint in order to keep with him. Reaching the Bentley, he put a hand on her shoulder. Knowing her strong sense of morality made her impervious to bribes, her turnabout had puzzled him, leaving him to wonder why she had changed her mind.

"Was the promise of your own office the only reason you took my side today?"

Ardelia looked up at him, studying his face as she considered her reply. "You're a winner. You always dream big, always strive to be the best and never, ever let us down. Yeah, you can be ruthless business wise but deep, down you're one of life's good guys. The simple truth is I trust you. We all do."

Momentarily stunned by the words all Hannibal could do in response was to squeeze her shoulder as an expression of thanks. Then she was gone, strolling towards her car, purse in one hand and gift bag, swinging in time with her step, in the other.

"Have they forgotten that it was your great, great grandfather, Lucien Sutcliffe who opened the very first Omega clinic right here in Baltimore? Or that it was your great uncle, Sebastian Sutcliffe who pioneered the development of side-effect free suppressants?"

Hannibal silently cursed his sister. Although he was thankful Alana had waited until they had finished dessert before announcing her news, the sudden change of mood in the dining room had put on end to his relaxing evening.

"And what would you have me do, father? Stay on as an underling?"

"Of course not." Robert spluttered. "This is blatant discrimination. I will look for a legal counsel who is an expert in employment rights."

"No, father, you will not. I don't want to fight." Alana said sternly. "I want to move on, experience the new."

Will's eyes flickering between the family members as they sparred, settled on Bedelia when she entered the fray. "Did Hughes offer your position to Dr Sydney?"

"Yes, but she turned it down. Jenny can't handle the social side, so they split my post into two. Jenny will run the clinic and the board have outsourced the fund raising. They intend to hire Patricia Mallory."

"Mallory?" Will was shaken when Bedelia made a sound eerily similar to a growl. "This is a repeat of Hughes and the heart foundation."

"Rumour has it that he and Mallory are more than close friends." Alana raised her eyebrows. "Apparently he has a thing for Betas."

"Beta." Robert proclaimed. "The board are getting rid of you because you're an Alpha then are bringing in a bloody Beta. You have to fight this, Alana."

"No, father, I've made up my mind. I'm taking a sabbatical. It is done, over. I don't need your advice or help so please back off. You'll only make matters worse."

"Of course, what use is an old fool like me? I'm well past my expiry date." Robert pushed back from the table and made his way to the door, grumbling as he went. "You might as well get a gun, take me outside and put me out of my misery."

"Father." Alana protested as she watched her father leave the room. Will had gotten used to the Alphas occasionally clashing but Robert's out of character theatrics had thrown him.

"He didn't mean it, Will." Bedelia said comfortingly. She had observed the Omega during the heated exchange, seen the stress indicators, the tell tale wide eyed look and the chewing of the lower lip. "I am afraid Robert has been on the receiving end of some pettiness at the White House, the most recent from a cyber security officer. He found Robert's lack of computer expertise comical and took to calling him the technosaurus. The name appears to have spread like a vine around the offices causing much amusement and for some reason Robert is unable to rise above it."

Having heard his father-in-law routinely express a genuine liking for his colleagues, Will understood it was more than a case of ruffled feathers. Will knew too well the gut shrinking dread that came from being mocked.

"That went well." Alana remarked sarcastically as she placed her glass of wine on the Captain's chest. Kicking off her heels, she flicked back her hair over her shoulders and slumped onto the couch next to her brother.

"In future I would appreciate advance warning before you go head to head with father." Hannibal sipped his brandy then watched as his sister reached for her drink and mirror his actions.

"I couldn't keep dodging the bullet, sooner or later the news would have got out." She looked at her brother. "I feel strangely liberated and want to get a little tipsy. I haven't spoilt your plans have I?"

"My plans?"

"Your new business premises are not far from the house you built for Will. You didn't sell it did you?" Alana challenged.

Hannibal looked down as he swirled the liquid in the glass. "A friend needed temporary accommodation so I allowed him use of the house. It suited us both."

Alana gave a sceptical laugh. "I know how you operate, Han, you've already arranged for Andrius to be schooled in the city, probably the twins will transfer next. Then what, wean Will from mother and father? Don't deny you want to be master of your own home because I'll know it will be a lie."

"I am thirty four and still sleep in the bedroom I shared with my brother when we were children." Hannibal bit out, turning until he was face on with his sister. "Do you consider me selfish to desire a change of residence or do you believe only you and Zeller are entitled to escape?"

"If mother hadn't been obstinate and had allowed you to remodel this house, we wouldn't be having this conversation." Alana said kindly. "You should have asked Will to be the go-between then she would have agreed."

"I would not use Will in that way. Besides Will has never shared my dislike for this mausoleum, he is happy with the way things stand."

"Sweet Omegan conformity, resistant to change even if it's in their best interest. Same could have been said of me but not anymore." She lifted her glass in a toast. "A la liberte."

Hannibal listened to his sister as she outlined her immediate future but her claiming knowledge of his strategy had troubled him. In reality, he had no grand plan, no calculated exodus from DuMaurier house. At least not one he was consciously constructing. The notion he was underhandedly manipulating Will was at odds with his principles. Honesty was absolute where his Omega was concerned, otherwise he would be no better than those who had deceived and hurt the boy in the past.

Will had found an excuse to gain access to Robert, who had retreated to his office and when the older Alpha's laughter trickled down the hallway Hannibal smiled in relief. Deciding to retire early, he soaked in a warm bath analysing his recent actions, seeing if behind his decisions there was an ulterior motive. After drying himself off he walked into the bedroom to discover the Omega sitting on the bed, legs stretched out, crossed at the ankles.

"Face down, Alpha, you need a massage." Will said as he patted the empty space beside him.

When Will gave him the look, the one which made the Alpha feel he was the centre of the Omega's universe, Hannibal felt the familiar spike of joy. Casually making his way across the room and dropping the towel around his middle, Hannibal gracefully lowered his body onto the bed. They did not talk as the Omega kneaded the knots in his back, squeezing every drop of tension out of his body. Once under the sheets and anticipating he would be chasing sleep, Hannibal pulled his Omega against him. Closing his eyes and inhaling the delicious sweet scent, Hannibal sank into oblivion.

"Yeah, yeah, hold on, Bev." Will placed his cell on the bureau and resumed rubbing the baby's back. Finally getting the response he required, he carefully secured Tomas into his cradling swing. Slipping into his FBI mode frame of mind, he retrieved his cell.

"Sorry, I was in the middle of persuading my son to burp. If I don't get it right he'll spit up all over me." Will explained.

"I thought your army of nannies did the ugly work?"

"Hey, I was up half the night soothing a fractious baby. This is a strictly hands-on household." Will raised his eyes to the ceiling where on the floor above the Beta staff were cleaning the bedrooms, devouring any dust and dirt in their path. "Well, mostly."

"I called because Zeller confirmed your suspicions, he found hesitation marks on three victims. He said the marks were bizarre, it was as if the Slayer couldn't cut with one clean slice."

"He was full of remorse, he didn't want to kill them. They were a means to an end." Will stated.

"However, according to Zeller whoever killed Craven, and I quote, *wielded the knife with great gusto.* Who says that nowadays? Other injuries suggest Craven went down fighting."

"The copycat didn't know how the Slayer subdued his victims so he improvised. It all went actively wrong. Craven may have looked reedy but he was stronger than he appeared."

"He worked out. Except for the dead part, physically he was in great shape."

"Why the hell didn't the Chicago examiners pick up on this?" Will exclaimed then groaned when a possible explanation popped into his head. "Don't tell me they did a half-assed job

because the victims were Omegas."

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger." Beverly chided. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Will gazed at his son and calmed. "What about the Alphas? Did you find a connection?"

"Two are in the system. The Alpha of victim one was hauled in over pimping and pandering. The last vic's Alpha was charged with assault. I'm still chasing the other one."

"If the cases went to trial then the suspect pool has widened. We could be looking at defence lawyers, court officials, they're the kind of professionals Omegas traditionally trust."

"I'll get back on it as soon as I can but things are pretty hectic here. We finally got hold of Jerome's financials. Jack so wants to nail that guy, he worked them himself. He had one of his guru moments, he's sent a team to Lafayette to check out storage units. He thinks that's where the Wagner girl may have ended up." Beverly paused to take a breath. "They found the remains of Juliette Meyer on the Jerome property. I know you empathise with Mrs Meyer but take a step back. Don't let this eat you up. You couldn't have saved her daughter. Both these girls were dead long before you were involved."

Will's cheeks flushed as he gave out his lie. "I've got it under control. These days I don't think that way."

"Hey, it's me you're talking to, kiddo, not some stranger. I remember how this played out in the past, the nightmares, the sleepwalking." Beverly said softly.

"Don't worry, Bev, I'm not that kid anymore."

"Just promise me something, Will. If you begin to feel a little different, feel you're losing yourself, call me."

Chapter 19

In his dream world Will drifted into self-satisfaction as he landscaped a life for Janet Meyer filled with happiness. In this alternative reality Juliette was a runaway who upon hearing of the fuss back home called her mother to tell her she was safe. Will imagined Mrs Meyer's tears of relief, her cries of joy after she had spoken to her daughter. Sure they had discovered the girl's body on the Jerome property but in this mind set a plausible explanation was quickly provided. A hung over medical examiner had screwed up the autopsy, a classic case of misidentification, Will knew it had happened before. He would call Jack, ask for a second autopsy and at the very least temporarily prevent Janet Meyer from being swallowed whole by soul-destroying grief.

Will slammed back to present time, remembering the fiction he had created for his sister and cursed himself for freefalling into the same trap. Drowning in a sea of hopelessness after Georgia had escaped, Will roamed through his mental depository of scenarios and had chosen one that enabled him to gift his sister a happy-ending. He needed her to survive. Daily he imagined the moment of his rescue, imagined Georgia running towards him, crushing him into a loving hug and peppering him with kisses. Sustained by a sprinkle of false hope, he retreated to the safe space inside his head when he learned she had died. Choosing to stay hidden, it was well over a week before he took the first tentative steps back into the real world.

Will pushed to one side his dangerous thinking and lost himself in his son. A kiss on the foot, a tummy tickle produced a succession of gummy grins and giggles. Every time Tomas threw his tiny arms up reacting to his Papa's praise, Will rejoiced in the richness of their bond. Only his words would make Tomas give a considered response. Breathing in the infant's honeysuckle vanilla scent, the tell tale sign the child had blossomed inside an Omega, Will heard the front door open and, on full alert, shifted his attention to the hallway. Hearing the tapping of the cane and Robert's educated tone, Will rose from the floor and walked to the open doorway. Robert had a contented smile on his face and a plastic folder tucked under his arm. Following close behind and carrying a large yellow box, Matthew bore the look of someone who was buckling under the weight of his load.

"What have you been up to?" Will gave his father-in-law a quizzical look.

"All in good time, William, we have more goodies to retrieve." Robert said as he proceeded to his office.

Intrigued Will waited for the men to reappear then held out a hand to halt his father-in-law. "I'll help Matt. The Countess would tan both our hides if you hurt your knee again."

Ignoring Robert's words of protest, Will followed Matthew out of the house to where the SUV was parked. With the trunk lid open, Will could see two large boxes in the back.

"How come you're chauffeuring the Colonel?" Will asked the agent.

Matthew gave a shrug. "The President instructed me to drive Mr Lecter to wherever he wanted to go. We wound up at a wax museum in Harpers Ferry. He met with this elderly guy and they talked for a while then Mr Lecter asked me to load up the vehicle. Between you and me, I was glad to get out of there, wax figures creep the hell out of me."

Will chuckled then smiled warmly at his friend. "It's great to have you back. I heard Grandma Kade played dirty to get you reinstated. Turning Sutcliffe House into senior citizen central was one smart move." Will was aware of most of what had happened, how Kade had unilaterally declared she wanted Matthew by her side for the last months of Donald's presidency and had written to the head of the secret service. When her demand was politely turned down, she retaliated by inviting her sisters and Bloom cousins to stay for an indefinite period."

Matthew hauled a box out of the vehicle. "Yeah, it wasn't long before half the detail were begging to be rescued from old lady land."

Will laughed as he grabbed the last box. "You're not sorry you're back though?"

"Hell, no. As much as I like the investigative side of the service, nothing beats working for the President and Mrs Sutcliffe."

While Matthew walked away confidently, Will trod cautiously, afraid he would trip over his own feet. By the time he reached the office Matthew was already on the point of leaving.

Robert shook Matthew's hand energetically. "I want to thank you for your help, young man. I hope you weren't too bored today?"

"Never with you sir." Matthew replied positively. "I'm glad to have been of assistance."

Will gave Matt a nod goodbye then found a corner to dump the box. He fought against the temptation to inspect its contents while Robert escorted the Beta to the front door.

"That young man has restored my faith in the younger generation." Robert said on his return taking position in front of his desk.

"Let it go, Colonel." Will gently admonished, disappointed that the previous evening's pep talk with the Alpha seemed to have failed.

"Ignore me, William; it's my age talking." Robert assured the Omega. "I have to accept it was a different world when I was growing up. We respected our elders, drew on their wealth of experience. Nowadays it would seem the only history for the young is the present. They have not yet grasped that the farther back you look, the farther forward you are likely to see."

"I told you, Colonel, they have hive mentality. Don't let them grind you down." Will cringed at his own hypocrisy, knowing he had hid himself away and cried many times over the subtle and not so subtle insults thrown his way.

"They won't." Robert straightened his back. "These mediocre types live in fear of execration if they do not follow their peers. I, on the other hand, take pride in my individuality and

therefore, shall ignore the bleating of sheep."

Will smiled at Robert's theatrical style and felt better now his father-in-law had regained his fighting spirit. The Alpha always offered him support and seeing him wounded made Will's world seem a little less safe. "So are you gonna tell me what you've been up to cause you sure as hell haven't been measured for a new suit?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I am guilty of a slight deception. What you see in front of you is Carl Craven's research."

"Have you been investigating Craven's death on your own?" Will exclaimed.

"No, not his murder, William, the other murders." Robert regarded the Omega with frustration. "His website, William, it was full of enthusiastic references to the book he was writing. Didn't you notice? He had chronicled a number of unsolved murders, some going back centuries, and had set about giving them resolution. Occasionally he would post teasers, enough to whet the appetite of those of us who enjoy a good mystery. When his life was cut short, it appeared his work had been abandoned and for some inexplicable reason it bothered me. I felt the need to realise his dream and give testimony to his talent."

"So how did you get all his stuff?" Will said tapping the top of the nearest box.

"I searched the public records, found the name of the attorney who handled Mr Craven's estate and spoke to her." Robert flipped open the folder on his desk and pulled out a wodge of papers. "Craven had entrusted the collection to an old friend on the understanding he would complete the work. Unfortunately the bequest held the man to ransom. The manuscript is in a fragmentary state, the paperwork is in no particular order and as there appears to be plenty of material to warrant three volumes, the sheer scale of the operation proved to be too much. Given my own literary success, he was more than happy to hand the whole thing over."

"It sounds kind of daunting."

"I have spent years delving into archives so the determination required for this particular task runs within me marrow deep. You need plenty of staying power, be willing to spend hours reading every notation and double-checking the facts. I have already contacted an old acquaintance, an editor in chief of a publishing company, and he has expressed great interest. Whether or not the book will be a success will be down to the public. It will go where it goes."

Hannibal arrived home later than planned, the upswing in the economy always had a positive effect on business and a sudden influx of new clients had lengthened his working day. The children were on him as soon as entered DuMaurier House and although about to be prepared for bed, Will granted them a stay on proceedings, allowing them time with their father. Unlike the previous evening, Robert was bouncing so high with excitement, he seemed to

have shed years. Contained while they ate diner, Robert talked incessantly once they retired to the sitting room and roped everyone into his adventure. Handing Hannibal half a chapter to read and asking Will to glance over newspaper clippings, Robert pestered his wife and daughter until they agreed to go to his office and see his latest find.

"I'm warning you, Robert, it better not be more pictures of dead bodies." Bedelia said sternly.

"No, no, my darling, these are articles and photographs of your great, great uncle, Claude DuMaurier, when he served as mayor of Baltimore."

As the trio headed down the hallway, Hannibal skimmed over Craven's work as requested. Reading about death had never appealed to him and he had only complied to please his father. Gradually aware that Will was no longer rustling papers, Hannibal glanced in his direction. Leaning back into the couch, the tip of his tongue caressing his top lip, the Omega was staring softly at the Alpha. When they made eye contact, Will instantly averted his gaze, looking awkward, embarrassed. It was rare for Will to make a sexual advance but there were occasions when, by look or by scent, Hannibal could tell the Omega wanted to. Touch starvation was the undoing of many Omegas.

After Will had gone behind his back to help Crawford again, Hannibal had felt morally justified in punishing the boy but soon he regretted his decision to cold-shoulder the Omega. Will's sense of injustice over how his abduction had been handled by the Louisiana police department lay just beneath the surface and helped to create within him a deep-rooted sense of abandonment. Over time, Hannibal had began to view Will's compulsion to aid those whom society deemed inferior as a by-product of his traumatic experiences rather than an attempt to impress. Discovering the cases that Will consulted on centred exclusively on Omega victims put a different slant on the situation. Trying to make amends, Hannibal found his approaches were either blatantly ignored or received a limited response. It soon became apparent to everyone, by Will's cadence of speech and cold hard stares, who he was mimicking. *"This is exactly how you behave towards Will at times." Bedelia informed her son. "He's giving you a taste of your own medicine."* It wasn't Will's attempt at revenge by mirroring the Alpha's traits that Hannibal found unpleasant, it was seeing reflected back an image totally devoid of compassion.

Hannibal rose from his chair, placed the paperwork on the vacant seat and smoothly crossed the room to sit beside his mate. As blue eyes studied him with curiosity, Hannibal cupped the boy's face with both hands and kissed him gently. Will responded, willingly parting his lips to let the Alpha's tongue explore. When they finally pulled away, Hannibal gave a satisfied sigh, nothing tasted as delicious as his Omega.

"That was unexpected." Will murmured.

"A sudden impulse." Hannibal replied, drinking in every inch of the Omega's beauty. "Since lines of communication between us have been re-established, I am finding trying to resist kissing you much harder."

Will attempted to duck his head but Hannibal held it firm, his thumb tracing the contours of the Omega's lips before he dipped in for another kiss.

Will smiled coyly after they broke free to draw breath. "I like it when you can't resist."

Hannibal leaned forward, rubbed his nose against the Omega's and whispered. "So do I."

Over breakfast, Will had been bright and cheerful and was swept up into Robert's plans for the day. Hannibal had left for work feeling less troubled, in contrast to the night before, when Will informed him the Meyer girl's body had been recovered. Will had been casual, too casual, as he spoke; there was no emotional display, no anger or tears, the very antithesis of how he normally behaved. The irony wasn't lost on the Alpha. For years, he had been exasperated over how Will could get upset over a flyer begging for information on a lost dog and often wished the Omega would toughen up a little. Now that Will presented himself as being unaffected by the death of a young girl, Hannibal was harbouring doubts as to whether he was genuine. Unwilling to the press the boy, Hannibal had no choice other than to accept things at face value but a splinter of unease had already worked its way under his skin.

It was another hectic day at the office and as was his way, Hannibal's thoughts revolved solely around his work, events at DuMaurier House were part of his other life. Even during the monotonous drive home, he mused over his working day, particularly the annoying but very wealth Beta client who wanted impractical features incorporated into her partially constructed mansion. Deciding to outsource the problem, he Invited one of his most flamboyant associates to the meeting, then sat back with smug satisfaction as Daniel Heath took over the show. Handsome and full of charm, Daniel was alive to his own magnificence and soon the belligerent woman was eating out of his hand, agreeing to his every word.

"Daddy, you sit there." Ella said as she walked Hannibal backwards to the couch. As soon as Hannibal sat down, Andrius scooted across the room, squatted at his father's feet and leaned against his legs.

Ella took her place in front of the family and proudly announced. "The Omegan Dragon."

Gabriella had been desperate to show the family how well she and her sister had performed in the school production. Willow had been less enthusiastic. Pedantic, as usual, she pulled at her clothes and despaired. "But I'm not dragon colour."

"I have an idea." Bedelia hurried out of the room, eventually returning with a lime green shawl that she draped over her granddaughter's shoulders. Catching Will shaking his head in disbelief, she protested. "I didn't buy it, it was a gift."

"Yeah, right." Will teased his mother-in-law then giggled when Bedelia scowled at him for questioning her taste.

Hannibal sat enthralled as the girls entertained the family and clapped his hands enthusiastically when they took their final bow. The spirited antics of the two little Omegas filled him with pride and when the girls rushed over to hug him, he was lost in the warmth of their unconditional love.

With the children tucked up in their beds, Hannibal gave in to weariness and not caring how inelegant it looked, slouched in his chair. He accepted his father's offer of a glass of Fonseca Porto but declined when Robert waved a plate of cheese straws under his nose.

"Go on, Hannibal, live dangerously." Robert joked. "They're very tasty."

Heavy lidded, Hannibal rested his eyes. Vaguely aware of a ring tone, of movement, he surfaced from his light doze to find Will gone. He caught the faintest trace of the Omega's scent, noticed the underlying acidity, a sign of distress, and went in search of his mate. Making his way out into the hallway, he glimpsed the figure sat on the stairs. As he approached he could see the Omega, arms wrapped around his knees, head bowed and his cell phone grasped in one hand. Only when the Alpha stood directly in front of him did Will raise his head.

"Jack called." The Omega explained. "Mrs Meyer contacted him, wanted to thank me for finding her baby. Said I'll always be in their prayers."

"Perhaps now that her daughter has been found Mrs Meyer will be able to obtain....."

"Please, don't say closure, Hannibal. Never say closure." Will pleaded. "Her life won't get better; it'll just be terribly different."

Hannibal could see the Omega had lost his glow. "Will?"

"I'm okay." Will muttered. "The autopsy results came through, Juliette's hyoid bone was fractured. She'd been strangled. Do you know how long it takes to die that way? How much sustained pressure is needed? It's not like in the movies."

A heavy silence hung between them until Will broke it. "I'm fine. Really. I just need a few moments to clear my head. I'll join you in a moment."

Will waited and once he was positive he was alone, he brought his hand to his throat and began to squeeze. In the dark recess of his mind, he could see Juliette clawing at Jerome, her leg thrashing, her world dimming. Her panic, her fear, he felt it all, she didn't want to die. Will dropped his hand, breathed in deeply and wiped away the tears. He grabbed the stair rail, pulled himself up and caging his grotesque imagination, he emotionally re-shelled and returned to the family.

He was in Jerome's slipstream, his heart pounding as he closed in. He dodged the falling garbage can and rounded the corner. The street was empty. Looming grey concrete buildings stretched as far as he could see and suddenly he became very afraid.

"Will." A voice hissed and the Omega jumped. Crawford stood behind the kneeling Jerome.

"Graham." Will spun around and Saul was beside him, offering him the glock. "Do you want to finish him or shall I shoot the bastard."

"Use this." Jack grinned maniacally and tossed Will the knife. The Alpha grabbed Jerome's hair and yanked back his head. "Remember, Will, great gusto. He's a parasite."

Will looked down at the jagged edged hunting knife in his hand and knew it belonged to Hobbs. He heard the scream and saw Jerome's throat had been torn out. He stood transfixed as Jack twisted the head, snapped it loose and held it up high. Blood spurted from the mouth, the empty eye sockets and Will instinctively covered his head with both hands.

"Try them, son." Jack held out a clenched hand and as he uncurled his fingers, Will recoiled in horror. "They're tasty."

Will turned, ran, slipped, then Saul was on him, wrenching his arm behind his back. The Alpha's face zoomed in and Will saw pure evil. "Rookie mistake." Saul spat out. "You got too fucking close."

"Will, wake up." Hannibal's voice was next to his ear. Will tried to squirm but the pressure on his back restricted his movements. "Wake up."

He came to, face down, arms pinned to the mattress. His heart thumping, Will stayed still trying to gauge whether this was real or imaginary.

"Are you awake, Will? You were having a nightmare."

The body shape, the scent, Will knew his Alpha. "Yeah, I'm awake." He felt the pressure lift, felt his arms freed and heard the click of a switch. He flinched when light illuminated the bedroom.

Will was afraid to look, afraid of what might be lying beside him. Slowly he raised himself up and glanced to his left. Even with his hair mussed up, Hannibal looked beautiful.

"What were you dreaming about?" Hannibal asked.

Will's mind flicked back to the chase, the alleyway, Jack and Saul. "It's a jumble. I was chasing something, next thing it was chasing me."

"The way you were thrashing about it was as if the devil himself was after you."

Will thought fast and tried to deflect. "It was probably your mom's shawl. It's hideous enough to give anyone a nightmare."

Hannibal huffed out a laugh. "It was rather bright."

"Bright? It was radioactive."

Hannibal softly chuckled. "Shall I turn out the light?"

Will nodded and Hannibal stretched out to the nightstand. The room plunged into darkness and Will snuggled closer to his Alpha, held on tightly. He felt the hem of his sleep shirt rucked up, felt Hannibal's hand rub small circles on his bare skin, felt the love.

Hannibal whispered. "Stress can trigger nightmares."

"So can too many cheese straws." Will whispered back. "I'm fine, Han. Everything is peachy."

They both knew it wasn't.

Chapter 20

"I warned you not to let the boy work for Crawford." Robert stated.

"You, yourself, said it was wrong for Will to stay hidden away inside this house." Hannibal retorted as he rinsed off the breakfast dishes then loaded them in the dishwasher.

"But these cases, these ghastly crimes, are bound to affect an Omega particularly one as sensitive as William. It's no wonder he's succumbed to depression."

Hannibal slammed the dishwasher door shut and rounded on his father. "Yet it is quite acceptable for Will to aid you in compiling a book which is filled with ghastly crimes. Are you not being somewhat hypocritical?"

"Please keep your voices down. The children are unsettled and bickering will not improve the situation." Bedelia closed the kitchen door behind her, positioned herself near the two men and took on her customary role of umpire. She waited until both men wilted a little under her glare before continuing. "Have you spoken to Will since he refused to come down for breakfast?"

"Yes. He pulled the sheet over his head and told me to go away. He said I lacked understanding." Hannibal replied.

"What did you say to him?" Bedelia asked.

"I tried to be sympathetic but according to Will I was spouting rhetoric. When I reminded of his duty towards our children he became upset."

"You've always been boneheaded when it comes to the needs of Omegas." Robert's frustration boiled over. "No wonder the boy stayed in bed."

"If I had been responsible for Will's state of mind then I would know how to make amends. His problems are caused by events beyond my control."

"Then more fool you in giving in to Will's request and allowing him to work for Crawford." Bedelia said bluntly. "The responsibility for this falls squarely on your shoulders."

"You surprise me, mother, after all are you not the one who is always pushing for the rights of Omegas to be expanded?" Irked by their comments, Hannibal regretted being truthful with his parents and wished he had stuck with the lie he had told the children.

"Hannibal, what Omegas are exposed to greatly influences their behaviour and like your father, I do not think the FBI is a healthy environment. In their rush to conform to society's wishes with regard to Omegan rights, they have omitted to put in place the necessary checks and balances to keep Omegas safe."

"Then what would you have me do?"

"I suggest you leave Will alone." Bedelia stated with a casual lift of her brows, daring her son to object. "I will take him a breakfast tray and if he wishes to talk, I will listen."

Will was sitting upright with his back against the bed board when he heard the taps on the bedroom door. Even if he had wanted to stay in the dark secret place inside him, the bright sunshine leaching around the edge of the drapes was forcing him to face the real world. He wasn't too surprised to see Bedelia gliding into the room, the Countess always rushed to his aid whenever he began to unravel.

"Coffee and toast." Bedelia placed the tray on the dresser. "I thought it best to keep breakfast simple."

Will caught the whiff of the freshly brewed coffee and his stomach growled. "I was planning on getting up. Staying here isn't gonna change anything. Hannibal likes his routine and I've already disrupted it enough."

"He said you were feeling a little down." Dressed in a cream coloured shirt and black pants, Bedelia looked stylish. Will doubted whether she could look any other way.

Will adjusted the sheets to cover his bare legs just before Bedelia sat down on the edge of the bed. "As soon as I opened my eyes the Meyer case came crashing in. It was the one I spoke about. It kinda sucked any motivation out of me."

"You met with Mrs Meyer and no doubt you empathised with her, therefore, it isn't surprising you feel this way. When sorrow is heavy, a person cannot always function."

"The truth is, it isn't just about Mrs Meyer. It's about her daughter, the way she died. It brought back the memories." There was an uncertain silence between them before Will's need to unburden urged him on. He trusted Bedelia; had confided in her in the past and knew she kept his secrets. "When Hobbs went away, his daughter Abigail took charge and she liked to indulge in her own particular brand of entertainment. She would slap me around until I was on the floor, sobbing, begging her to stop. There was this one day, I don't know what got into me but I snapped. I hit her so damn hard, I knocked her out."

"People do not always know how strong they truly are until being strong is the only choice they have."

"It didn't do me any good 'cause she got me back. She ordered two of the men to hold me down and then she choked me until I blacked out. When I came around she did it again." As she absorbed Will's shocking revelation, Bedelia kept her smile frozen in place. She knew breaking down would be counterproductive and that she could weep for him later. "Not that hurting me did her any good either. When Hobbs returned and saw the marks on my neck, he beat her real bad."

"Violence begets violence."

"Dog eats dog. It got me raking over the past, remembering the missed opportunities, the times I could have escaped. If I had taken a chance, things might have ended differently."

"You are looking back through adult eyes. You were a child, Will, caught up in a horrific situation and paralysed by fear. It is highly unlikely even an adult would be capable of rational thinking given the circumstances."

"You believe I'm wrong in blaming myself?"

"I believe you need to forgive yourself for surviving." Bedelia's mouth thawed into a sympathetic smile. She understood, too well, how a childhood cut short became the emotional wound that never healed. "As I have told you many times before, professional help may be beneficial."

"What I need is a delete button inside my head so I can get rid of these memories. It's like looking through a distorted lens. I'm never sure if these things happened to me or to some other kid."

"Have you told Hannibal about the attack by the Hobbs girl?"

Will smiled and shook his head slowly. "He tries not to, but he gets angry when I tell him about the past. What he feels is frightening. He wants to hunt down those who hurt me, tear them apart, piece by piece. Guess it's lucky for them they're already dead."

"Hannibal is emotionally intelligent, yet even he is governed by his Alphan nature when it comes to your welfare."

"That's what scares me and that's why I can't always tell him the truth." Will confessed.

From his seat in the sunroom, Hannibal observed the children playing a ball game on the lawn, the rules of which he had yet to decipher. Hannibal was aware that the differences in the children's temperaments had produced the occasional clash and was ready to step in and act as buffer if needed. Where before Andrius, due to his dynamic, had been the dominant, Ella was now assuming the role of matriarch of the group. Willow, on the other hand, didn't need a pack leader, she just needed sunshine, butterflies and for everyone to be happy. As he watched them run around giggling, he wondered what the future held for the children, what professions they would choose to follow and whether the world they lived in would change sufficiently to afford his girls the same opportunities as their brothers.

Hannibal was apprehended in his thinking when Willow walked over to him and stretched out her arms. "Hug?"

Growing up in an Alpha family meant there had been a paucity of hugs and kisses and Hannibal was determined that his children would never be denied physical comfort if desired. He reached for her and swung her onto his lap.

Willow wriggled until she was comfortable then her eyes dug deep into those of her father. "Papa's sad 'cause he misses his mommy and daddy."

For a moment Hannibal was lost for words, taken aback that Will had spoken candidly to their daughter. "Did Papa tell you he misses them?"

Willow's curls bounced when she shook her head and she placed her hand flat against her chest. "I know when Papa's hurtin'."

Willow's heightened sensitivity and ability to assess a situation never ceased to amaze and concern Hannibal, she was almost a carbon copy of her Papa. Often, when she spoke, he heard Will's words come tumbling from her mouth.

"Daddy, please make Papa all smiley again." Willow pleaded.

"You want me to talk to your Papa." Hannibal clarified her request.

Willow nodded. "On tippy toes."

Hannibal frowned and catching his look the girl walked two fingers along his arm. "Papa tells us when you're not happy or all growly to walk round on tippy toes."

Intrigued, Hannibal felt compelled to ask the question. "Am I ever growly with you?"

"No." Willow replied then gave him a sad look. "Only with Papa."

The words stung. It was a slap in the face from the daughter he adored. "Does it scare you when I act that way?"

Willow looked thoughtful then beamed him a smile. "No, 'cause you're all squishy inside and you love us lots and lots and lots and lots."

Overwhelmed by a sense of relief, Hannibal pulled his daughter closer. A soft growl rumbled from deep inside him. *You're safe, you're loved* it told his little girl.

"I will go to your Papa, if it will make you happy, but no promises though." He brushed the tip of the little Omega's nose with his finger while smiling warmly. "If I had the power, little one, I would make your whole world forever smiley."

Showered and dressed by the time Hannibal entered the bedroom, Will sat motionless on the bed observing. Hannibal could tell by the Omega's expression he was not sure whether the Alpha had come to make peace or to scold. The empty cup and plate on the dresser to some extent ease Hannibal's concerns. During the other occasions when the Omega had been disconsolate, he had hardly eaten for days.

Will shot out an apology. "I'm sorry about earlier. I needed my own space."

Moved by the air of vulnerability shrouding the boy, Hannibal took a deep breath and expelled the residue of rancour he still held over Will's expletive riddled outburst. "If you had expressed your need then I would have given you the space you required. Instead you chose to curse at me and was surprised when I reacted."

"Telling me to grow up triggered me that's why I hit out." Although Will's words were defiant, his tone lacked any bite.

"I was merely reminding you of your responsibilities regarding the children." Hannibal crossed the room and held out his hand towards the Omega. When Will took it, Hannibal pulled him up into an embrace. "I am not without sympathy for Mrs Meyer but incorporating her suffering into our lives will not change anything. There is no cure for grief, it is what it is."

Will leaned back a little and looked up at the Alpha. "I screwed up, Han. Losing someone to violence is truly horrible. It stays with you, becomes the background noise that's always there. Meeting Mrs Meyer was a bad idea, I could taste the misery. From now on, I'll keep my distance, I promise. I won't make the same mistake again."

Hannibal flirted with forbidding Will from working but envisaging the resulting conflict from such a decision backed away from the idea. Instead, looking into the Omega's captivating eyes, he hoped Will's disenchantment with his beloved FBI would continue to flourish. "I am worried about you, Will. The work you are undertaking for my father and Crawford revolves entirely around the macabre."

"Your dad's work doesn't get to me. It's ancient history, I don't connect with the victims. What I need now is to fill my head with positivity. Guess it's too late to go to the club and meet up with Chavez?"

"A change of plans. I called Rafa and he was happy to postpone the match as he has family business to attend to. He mentioned he and Antony are at a loose end tomorrow so I invited them over. It has been a long time since I cooked on a grander scale and as the weather will be ambient, we can dine outside, family and friends."

"Are we having a barbeque?" The Omega asked mischievously.

"No, we are dining alfresco."

Will rolled his eyes. "You're such a snob, Mister Alpha."

Hannibal didn't bother to defend himself, delighting instead in Will's sudden playfulness. "There is no pressure, Will, but I need to go to the Omega market to pick up supplies. If you are in the mood I would appreciate the company."

Will's lips curved into a fully-fledged grin. "You're doing this to cheer me up, aren't you? Taking me to a place you know I enjoy."

"It is purely for selfish reasons." Hannibal replied, his eyes shining with affection. "My world is a much happier place when you are smiling."

During his time at the Sanctuary, Will's vagaries of behaviour were explained away by Frederick as a touch of the Omega blues. Theorising Will absorbed the emotions of others as well as reflecting them, Frederick ordered the staff to be up-beat and motivated around the boy. The blues came nowhere close to describing the bleakness engulfing Will, how the very thought of making it through another day wore him down. Originally dismissive of Frederick's strategy, to his surprise, Will discovered it actually worked. Surrounded by people who had purpose, Will got back into the rhythm of everyday life, tucking away his negative thoughts by concentrating on the now.

The Lecter children needed no instruction on how to behave around their Papa when he returned to the fold. Guided by love, they fussed over him, hugged and kissed him, happy he felt better. Feeding him their joy and energy, his dazzling smile soon flashed across his face.

Hannibal drove the side roads to the city and Will occasionally turned his head and watched the Alpha's diaphragm move with every breath he took.

"I still can't believe you told them I had belly ache from eating too many cheese straws." Will murmured.

"It was the best I could come up with at short notice." Hannibal replied unapologetically.

"You know the kids are gonna watch my food intake from now on." Will huffed.

Although the market was louder and more crowded than usual, Will immediately became aware of the looks given their way. Hannibal couldn't go unnoticed, despite dressing down and wearing a plain t-shirt and jeans. His scent, the way his body moved, gave away his thoroughbred status and vendors, sensing Hannibal would pay handsomely for the best produce, were eager to do business. Even the sourly fish trader Will tried to avoid succumbed to the raw masculine charisma of the Alpha. A combination of good-humoured banter and the extra bills Hannibal peeled off his cash roll had the man agreeing to deliver his finest to DuMaurier house early next morning. With Hannibal's arm around his waist, Will found being steered around the market by his strong, confident Alpha strangely seductive and as they returned to the car, he had only one thing on his mind.

"Do we have to go straight back home?" Will asked as Hannibal placed the groceries into the trunk of the car.

Hannibal looked over at the Omega. "We were quicker than I expected. What do you have in mind?"

"Can we make a detour?" Will moistened his bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. "I left my jacket at the Chandler house the other day. I really need it."

Hannibal gave Will the smile; the smile reserved for his Omega, a wolfish smile that made Will's skin tingle. "If you need it then I am more than happy to oblige."

Although Omegas were bound by sexual fealty to their Alphas, Hannibal preferred an enthusiastic partner so when Will moved on him fiercely once inside the Chandler house, he responded in kind. Between the kissing and tugging at each other's clothing they made their way to the bedroom and by the time Will was pushed back onto the bed, his jeans were around his ankles. They slowed their pace and Will's release when it came was overpowering. Clinging to his Alpha's shoulders, panting, he was lost to the pleasure.

Lying next to each other, enjoying the closeness, the question whether the Alpha was truly satisfied inched its way to the forefront of Will's mind. Hannibal never spoke about his previous sexual encounters and Will never asked. The Omega's fingers teased through the mass of hair on the Alpha's chest then traced the dark line down the Alpha's belly.

"If you go any lower you will be in for a big surprise."

Will giggled. "I'm surprised you have any energy left."

"I am an Alpha; we always keep something in reserve."

Will rolled over, snatched up his briefs from the floor then deftly slipped into them on leaving the bed. "Better take a shower. Don't want them back home catching my scent and know what we've been up to."

"If you want our activities to be kept secret then I suggest you remove that smirk from your face before we get back."

Hannibal no longer commented on the Omega's need to cover himself outside the bed. He could never forget the ferocious response he received when he teased the Omega one time too many.

"If you'd been kept in cage, naked, then maybe you'd have hang ups as well."

The outburst had stunned the Alpha as did the boy's words when they eventually spilled out.

"They didn't sexual abuse me, they...." Will's voice had broken with emotion. *"They ridiculed me."*

Hannibal's breathing had deepened as a surge of anger swelled from the pit of his stomach. He brushed away the hair from his Omega's face, studied the boy's expression searching for a clue on how to proceed and watched the tears flow.

"Han, I'm getting there but for the time being promise me you won't say anything when I cover up."

The Alpha gave his word and never again made any remarks over the Omega's need for modesty and never stopped discreetly hunting for the boy's tormentors.

Chapter 21

They arrived home to find the Foster farm chickens, plucked and neatly trussed up, sitting in their trays on the kitchen counter. Ella waited patiently while her father inspected them until her curiosity became too much. Tugging on his waistband, she asked.

"Why are the chickens inside out?"

Stooping over and placing his hands on his knees, Hannibal couldn't help smiling as he spoke to his daughter. "Later I will be preparing the marinade. Would you like to be my sous chef?"

Ella jumped up and down, squealed out a *yes* before racing off to tell the others.

"Wow. That was an impressive way to dodge an awkward question." Will remarked.

"I believe I have only gained a postponement. Gabriella seems to have developed an unquenchable thirst for knowledge." Hannibal stated. "If I answer one question then I face a never ending avalanche of others."

"Lightweight." Will scoffed. "Wait till she and Willow team up. When you're caught in their crossfire it feels like your brain is gonna explode."

When Bedelia glided into the kitchen, the two Alphas quickly became embroiled in their shared passion and all talk centred around the haute cuisine. Will didn't mind being on the periphery, he found it deeply moving when the special bond between this mother and son was openly displayed. Hit by a sudden urge to be with the children, Will waited for the right moment to slip away. After hours of interaction with his brood, he felt relief when they were finally tucked into their beds and went in search of adult company.

Robert looked over the rim of his glasses as Bedelia settled into the chair. "We'll be eating leftovers for weeks. There's enough bloody food to feed an army."

Sitting crossed legged on the floor, Will smiled as he raked through the largest of Craven's boxes. He didn't need to raise his head, he knew Bedelia had given Robert her warning look.

"I'm only here because I feel that I've neglected you today but if you're going to be sniffy." Bedelia stated.

"Just calling it as it is." Robert replied in an exaggerated Southern accent.

Will burst out laughing. Over the years, Robert's hideous attempts to bust out the drawl always drew the same response from the Omega.

"And exactly what am I supposed to be doing?" Bedelia stared at the stack of papers positioned near the edge of Robert's desk.

"On the top right hand side of each page you will see a name. If you extract those tagged the Vermont Vampire, I would be most grateful."

As Bedelia began her task, Will continued rummaging through the box and halfway down found his target.

"Got it." He said holding up the folder. "The Philadelphia Phantom."

"Is law enforcement compelled to give murderers alliterative nicknames?" Bedelia asked in a sarcastic manner.

"A marketing ploy devised by newspaper editors to increase circulation." Hannibal stood in the doorway, an apron dangled over his arm. "Capturing the public's attention through fear or the salacious is standard business practice even today."

"Take the Phantom for instance." Robert began, adding a dramatic undertone to his voice. "Three young women were slain backstage in the Elliott theatre in 1927. It was the era when theatres attracted a family audience and being a performer was considered a respectable profession even for Omegas. After the first two deaths, security was tightened, men were not allowed near the female dressing room areas and yet, despite these measures, another murder occurred. When the only eyewitness described the killer as *dressed in black and wearing a mask*, the rumours began. There was talk of secret passageways, of underground tunnels where a shadow being lived. Not only did the newspapers print these tales, they embellished them. The Phantom was born."

Will opened the folder and let the contents slide onto the floor. He carefully spread out the photographs and newspaper clippings and focusing on the startling, sharp black and whites, absorbed every tiny detail. The three females lay on their backs, two wearing Glasgow smiles. Will couldn't pretend to be repulsed, couldn't fake a shudder, the reality was he had seen worse.

"During their infancy, forensic departments were underfunded so the press and police developed a symbiotic relationship." Robert stated as he observed his son-in-law. "Press photographers were used to record the crime scenes and in return, reporters were present when suspects were interrogated. Those very same images would probably have appeared in every newspaper."

"Were the girls molested?" Will asked.

"No." Robert replied. "Although two were in their petticoats, it was believed they were attacked when they were changing into their costumes. The third girl was fully dressed and judging by the state of the room, put up quite a fight."

"You said there was an eyewitness."

"A young woman from the local florist. It was normal practice for performers to receive gifts from admirers and she delivered the bouquets. They said she was lucky to sustain only scratches and bruises considering she interrupted a maniac who was about to mutilate his latest victim." Robert took stock of the Omega who was hunched over, looking downwards. "As quickly as they started the murders ended and because the Phantom's heinous crimes never attained legendary status, he slowly faded from the public's memory."

"*She* slowly faded." Will said as he scrambled to his feet. Clutching the photographs he placed them face up on Robert's desk.

"Look there and there, the first two victims had bouquets in their room." Will stabbed a finger at the images. "Look at the last victim. See the flowers strewn over the floor, see how she's positioned. She fell on top of them."

"Are you suggesting the delivery girl was the killer?"

"The evidence suggests the victim was very much alive when the delivery girl entered the room. Then she wasn't." Will began excitedly. "The police knew they had screwed up, they had kept the dog fox out of the hen house but welcomed in the vixen. The only way to cover their mistake was to disappear her."

"You gleaned all that from glancing at the photographs?" Will nodded in response to Robert's question. "Carl Craven spent days wading through the Philadelphia police department's archives before coming to the same conclusion. You, you just looked."

With his ability under scrutiny, the old familiar twist of tension spiralled inside him. Ducking his head slightly, Will replied lamely. "It's what I do."

The morning light brought him out of his deep sleep, Hannibal heard the door open, heard the light footfall and the muted tones.

"Ella." Willow hushed out fearfully.

"S'okay." Her sister whispered back, drawn to the bed by the sight of her father's feet poking out from beneath the covers. Hannibal felt small fingers touch his big toes, felt them wiggled. "See, Daddy's asleep."

"This is the good toe and this is the naughty one." Ella tapped them against each other. "Take that and that."

Throwing back the covers, the Alpha sat up and Gabriella to let out a high-pitched squeal as she ran to her sister. Clutching at each other, they saw their father's warm grin, saw him pat the mattress and taking up the invitation, scrambled onto the bed.

"Is Papa sleeping?" Willow asked, staring at the back of Will's head.

Will groaned when the girls began to bounce up and down. "I was."

"Grand-mama sent us." Ella huffed out cheerily. "She said to wake up the sleepy heads."

As he pulled the sheet over his head, Will muttered. "One day I'll return the favour."

With the kitchen out of bounds while Hannibal added the final touches to his creations, Will volunteered for the menial tasks. Aided and abetted by the children, he cleaned down the picnic tables and polished the cutlery, knowing it would have taken half the time if he had carried out the tasks on his own.

The arrival of the guests brought about a change in the girls; they blushed when spoken to and ducked their heads Omegan style but Antony's natural charm soon brought out their chattiness. Presenting Alana with a list of contacts to help secure employment, Antony casually mentioned Villiers at the UN and Professor Southerly at Oxford University had taken an interest in her. Observing his sister-in-law's look of surprise at the news, Will wondered if she believed in herself as much as Antony did.

"Before I forget, Hannibal." Antony smiled at his friend. "Hugo Bloom is arranging a final big bash in New York before he hands over the reins of the business to his son. As you have found excuses not to attend the last two parties, he wants me to twist your arm to make sure you don't book something else for that particular weekend, real or imaginary."

"The old crowd will be there." Rafa grinned. "Even Lester the Jester."

Hannibal smiled at the name. "The new king of Silicon Valley. It's been years since I have seen him."

"Once I receive the invitations I will hand deliver yours thus ensuring I keep my end of the bargain. The invitation is for both you and Will." Antony turned to the Omega and continued. "Will, I can guarantee it is an experience like none other. You will have the time of your life."

Seated around the table, communications between the adults was easy as they feasted and the wine flowed. Bedelia and Robert had always taken an interest in their children's friends and kept an open door policy, ready to welcome them into their home. Although Will was content to be carried along by the ebb and flow of conversation rather than take the lead, he gently encouraged the children to take part when appropriate.

"I'm going to be President like Uncle Donald." Andrius declared after Antony had related how a fascination with butterflies from a young age had led to his primary career.

"I'm going to be an archie teck like Daddy." Gabriella announced proudly.

Antony waited but when the third sibling didn't declare her intentions, he was overcome by the need to gentle her into a response. "And what are you going to be when you grow up,

young Willow?"

The little girl took a break from her dessert and landed a glance on her inquisitor.

"I am going to be me." She exhaled heavily. "Obviously."

Seeing the debonair Alpha sitting open mouthed and lost for words, Willow's lips formed into a little smile of satisfaction. Enjoying the silence, she slowly licked the back of her spoon then dug it deep into her ice cream.

As the novelty of being with adults began to wear thin and the conversation inevitably veering towards politics, Will sensed the children had reached their boredom threshold. Shepherding them into the house, he provided paper and crayons, suggesting they use their creative skills to produce a keepsake for their guests. On his return to the group, he could hear Antony laughing.

"Oh, come on, Robert, you can't keep straddling the fence. I have already made a wager so I can't back out. Who is going to be your party's nominee for the presidency?"

"Well." Robert mused. "I'm afraid Anderson is so unremarkable he could walk around with his underpants on his head and no one would notice. As for Allerton, his need to give his support to every popular cause has left him whirling around in a perpetual state of confusion so, as much as it pains me, James Hayden Tier seems to be the only viable candidate."

"You don't seem too pleased with that possibility." Rafa said.

"My problem with young Tier is his father's influence. It is hard to tell with those two where one ends and the other begins."

"Forgive me but I thought you and Harland Tier were on good terms?" Antony stated.

"There have been two DuMaurier presidents and both chose a Tier as their vice." Bedelia interjected. "When my brother announced his intention to run many assumed, given our ancestry, history would repeat itself. However, Donald did not want a White House full of Alpha elitists so decided on a Beta as his running mate. That is why he picked Davidson. Rather than accept his dynamic cost him the vice-presidency, Harland Tier preferred to believe that Robert had run interference against him. Needless to say, he was very vocal about it."

"To be fair, the antagonism is not one sided." Robert shifted in his chair. "The more I began to know Tier, the more the shine came off his reputation. I discovered too late that he majestically masks his political sadism. In public he appears sincere and kind-hearted but behind the scenes, he can be cold-eyed and ruthless. He is a man for whom success means everything and should it be out of reach, will poison the well to ensure the failure of those who come after. Harland Tier will do whatever it takes to secure the presidency for his son even if it means compromising his own beliefs. Under a Tier regime, I am very much afraid the rights of Omegas will be watered down to appease the Beta lunatic fringe."

"Surely people will not agree to Omegas being oppressed again?" Antony asked.

Bedelia shrugged. "Harland Tier's attack dogs are experts at cruel works of fiction. Unable to criticise Donald directly, they have targeted his advisers. By suggesting Donald has been ill informed, they can slowly unpick those policies that do not suit their purpose. They are using Robert and the other advisers as a way to undermine my brother. Not only has Robert been portrayed as a buffoon but also a man whose loyalty to this country and his wife should be questioned."

"That's real low." Will murmured.

"Low?" Bedelia repeated. "Their actions are cowardly and scandalous. They are consigning decent men to the political sewer. This whole situation is utterly infuriating."

Underneath Bedelia's cool and detached exterior, Will saw the ferocious tigress ready to defend those she loved.

"When Tier and his ragged group of opportunistic loons take action, it is on an industrial scale. They have projected an image of me as an old fogey out of touch with the modern world. The more I defend myself, the more pathetic I appear. In this high tech era, it is an effective way to destroy someone's reputation." Robert added.

"Is there nothing you do?" Rafa asked.

A smile crept over Robert's face. "Beat them at their own game. Unsolved murders spark interest, especially among the younger set, so I am about to become a web sleuther which will allow me to promote my new book." Robert held up a hand. "Before you leap in, William, I spoke to Abel and he put me in touch with a group ethical bloggers, at least he says they are ethical, who are more than happy to be my gatekeepers. I can assure you, with Abel's army at my side, I will be perfectly safe."

As the afternoon drifted into early evening, Will excused himself to get the children ready for bed, turning down Bedelia's offer of help. By the time he returned, the group sat holding playing cards.

"What's going on?" Will asked.

"As the clash of the titans wasn't settled on the tennis court, Rafa and Hannibal have elected for a quick hand of poker to decide who is the Grand Poobah." Antony beamed.

"After much persuasion, my brother finally agreed it would be shockingly rude not to let us all take part." Alana smiled sweetly at Hannibal.

"The more the merrier." Hannibal gave a tight lipped smile in return.

Will noted the pile of coins set in the middle of the table. "You're playing for pocket change?"

"You should always keep the pot small." Robert grimaced as he studied his cards. "That way friends do not fall out."

Will snuggled down under the sheet. "Are you still huffy?"

"I am not huffy." Hannibal replied then as an afterthought added. "Technically, only Rafa and I should have played."

"Oh, come on, Han, she's your sister."

"Beginner's luck."

"Your faces when Alana won." Will chuckled. "Talk about wounded pride. You don't react this way when the children beat you."

"Rock, paper, scissors does not tax my mental ability." Hannibal rolled onto his side. "Still, I am glad you found delight in my defeat."

Will could hear the smile in his voice and tucked up inside the Alpha's solid embrace, began to drift towards sleep. "You know Antony is in love with Alana."

There was a hesitation before the Alpha spoke. "I am aware although I doubt she is."

Will sighed as he closed his eyes. "He's gonna get hurt."

Due to the heavy traffic, the drive to Quantico had been more stop then go, intensifying Will's sense of foreboding. He had been fine when he woke up that morning and after reviewing the updates Beverly had sent to his cell, was eager to get to work. Ten minutes alongside Zeller, his enthusiasm had drained away. Zeller had talked incessantly about the Landry homicide, the case he had taken an interest in and ran with. His blow-by-blow account of the investigation was out of character, too much information, too much fine detail. When they parked up at Quantico and neither made a move to get out of the car, Will took it as confirmation he wouldn't like what he was about to hear.

Will turned his head towards his brother-in-law. "Spit it out."

"I'm sorry, Will, there's a rumour going around you had a meltdown in the men's room because you've been loaned out to VCAC to go undercover in a sex trafficking sting."

Will stared at Zeller. "Why would being loaned out get to me?"

"VCAC is prohibited from using Omega agents as decoy sex workers instead they use the genuine article."

"Prostitutes." Will tensed up as the implication hit him. "Hobbs shouldn't be the story of my life but thanks to fucking Lounds and her fucking insinuations it fucking is."

"Will, we'll go in together, see Jack....."

"No." Will snapped out. "I'll deal with it."

Zeller waited, giving the Omega time to calm down, before asking. "Okay, so exactly how are you going to deal with it?"

"Beat them at their own game." Will took in several deep breaths, trying to keep a tight lid on his emotions. His gaze flickered over the cars parked in the row ahead. "If they're talking shit about me behind my back then I might as well give them something real to chew over. I'm going in there and before the end of the day, I'm gonna present Jack with the name of the Parkwood Slayer."

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